

ENCHANTED
by a
FIERY LADY

LUCY
LANGTON

A Lady's Sinful Intention

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

LUCY LANGTON

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Introduction

Chapter 1

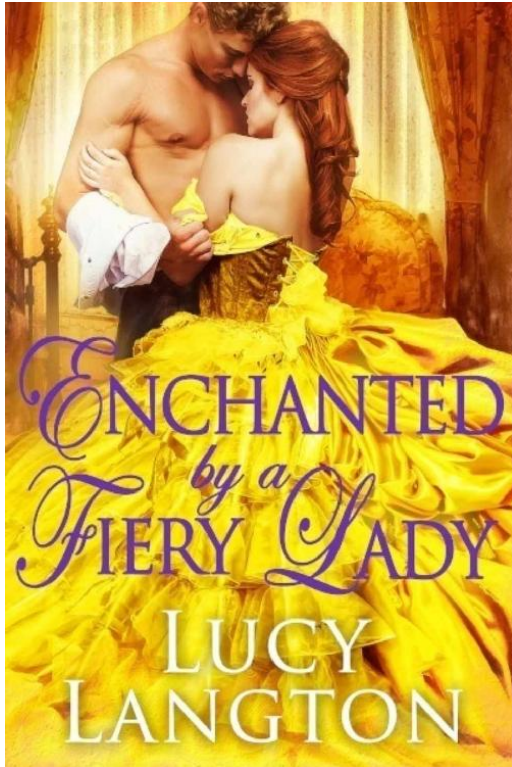
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A Lady's Sinful Intention

Introduction

Lydia Seymour has had her eyes on the beguiling Duke, Percy Wentworth, since she was just a child, and grew up fascinating about him as if he was an alluring romance hero. Years later, during a fateful night at a ball, the tempting Lydia is finally given the chance to speak with the man of her dreams. Sparks immediately fly between them and Lydia's heart soars. However, right when their temper flares, Percy disappears without any excuse. Lydia is left feeling jilted and tricked and those green eyes are haunting her dreams for days. Vulnerable and broken-hearted, she tries to fool her feelings by finding comfort in the attention of another Duke that has been pursuing her, Edmund Russel. Knowing however that he will never make her heart sing like Percy does, will she find the courage to go after the flaming passion she truly dreams of?

Meanwhile, Percy Wentworth, the ravishing Duke of Wexley, has spent much of his life trying to live up to society's expectations and chasing after his rebellious little sister, Georgiana. When he meets Lydia, the dashing daughter of the local doctor, the connection between them is undeniable, but it lasts for just a glimpse of an eye. Percy has no time to waste on his love life when there are far more pressing family matters burdening his shoulders. However, it's simply impossible to forget about their mesmerising encounter that instantly

captivated him both physically and mentally. Despite knowing it's better to keep her at distance, he soon finds himself yielding to her skillfully erotic seduction and only one question remains... Can he resist surrendering his heart to the most dazzling woman he has ever known?

Percy and Lydia seem to just keep running into each other, and the mystery around Percy's sudden disappearance needs to remain hidden... as does their overwhelming passion for each other. Now Lydia has to choose between two men and a decision has never been more difficult... Will she choose the man who dares to be with her publicly, or the man that her heart and body truly belong to? Lydia isn't the only one facing a dilemma, as Percy is also fighting his own internal battles... After everything, will this childhood friendship stand a chance of turning into a sizzling affair or will it go down in flames?

Chapter 1

“That surely cannot be what happened to her! You’re not serious, are you?” Lydia Seymour asked her dearest friend, Marianne Haggerston, as they sat in Marianne’s bedroom together, putting the finishing touches on their hair. Unfortunately for them, neither girl was very skilled in hairstyling.

However, what detail they lacked in their hair they made up for in their dresses, for the two young women were both about to put on their very finest gowns. Marianne’s was a deep red to complement her dark, almost black hair, and Lydia’s was a sunny yellow that made her golden locks look even more radiant.

“How dare you question my report!” Marianne scolded her, tugging the length of ribbon from her hand and securing it in place on her head. “Yes, Nadine Drakesmoor was indeed tossed from her horse into the river in front of her suitor, Robert Tutty, and her dress was such a sheer white that he very nearly saw ... everything!”

Lydia gasped in horror. “Can you imagine that happening to one of us? If that were me, I would never show my face in society again!” Lydia attempted to shove an errant hair that had escaped the clutches of her hairpins, but no matter how much she poked and prodded, it simply would not stay. Finally, she resigned herself to the fact that she would have one curl bobbing in front of her face the whole night.

“Well, she certainly won’t be at the ball this evening,” Marianne informed her. “Her mother has forbid Robert from seeing her until ... Come to think of it, I cannot think of how her mother would ever allow Robert to see her again!”

Lydia fought to keep a straight face.

“Perhaps,” she posited, “if he were to wear a suit of the identical material Nadine had been wearing and then took a dip in that enormous, hideous fountain that they have at the front of the estate, that would make them even!”

Marianne burst out laughing, and Lydia immediately followed. “Can you *imagine*? Robert ‘The Hairy Beast’ Tutty ... naked? Good thing for Nadine, though, he’d probably have so much hair all over that she wouldn’t be able to see anything anyway!”

Marianne continued howling, but Lydia swatted her playfully. “Now, now, we must not consider any gentlemen who we might run into tonight ... without clothing. I do not believe I could maintain my composure in front of any of them if we did that.”

“Then it is a good thing I happen to know that a great many men from Bury St Edmonds shall be in attendance. You shall assume your typical spot along the wall in fear of interacting with newcomers, and you won’t ever have to undress any of them with your mind!”

Hearing this jest, Lydia took the strings on the bottom of Marianne’s corset and pulled them tighter, making Marianne cry out in surprise.

Lydia kept a neutral face and simply said, “My apologies. Your corset just looked like it could use another tightening.”

Marianne was momentarily annoyed and rolled her eyes at her best friend. "I did not deserve that, and you know it." Marianne stood up from her seat and walked over to her dress to put it on. "I am simply informing you of the truth, that you are far too shy around gentlemen, and I shall not be punished for it."

Lydia arched an eyebrow and put her hands on her hips.

"Then shall I punish you for gossiping?" she teased her. But when Marianne turned around and gave her a knowing look, Lydia dropped her scolding and returned to her enthusiastic self. "Oh, fine, fine, go ahead and tell me who will be there, for I know you must be just bursting to."

Having received permission, Marianne animatedly launched into her report of all the gentlemen who would be in attendance at the ball tonight. While her dear friend's hands were flying all about, telling Lydia exactly what she thought about *this fellow* or *that fellow*, Lydia began thinking of a certain gentleman who she hoped would be in attendance tonight.

His name was Percy Wentworth. He was not the extraordinarily handsome, strapping duke that Lydia had read about so many times in her fanciful books, but he was good looking to her. He had medium-length chestnut brown hair, magnificent green eyes, and a soft, kindly look to his face.

He had a prominent, but not unsightly, nose, and he stood about a foot taller than Lydia's petite five foot two-inch frame. In Lydia's mind, he was the man of her dreams, and that was, in part, because she had known of him all her life.

They had first met when they were both quite young. Lydia had come along with her parents to a ball as a special treat for maintaining such excellent achievements in her education, and Percy was there with his family as well.

The Seymours were introduced to the Wentworths along with some other families in the same rank, as none of them were as wealthy or held the titles that the Wentworths did. And yet, the moment that Lydia laid eyes on Percy, she knew that her life would never be the same again.

He looked so unlike anyone she had ever met before, and he was, after all, a duke. In addition to that, however, Lydia watched how he interacted with all the adults that he met; he seemed to treat every one of them as though they were on the same societal level that he was. No arrogance or privilege was dripping from his voice, and he seemed genuinely interested in the goings-on of these people who he had been introduced to.

Lydia, however, knew that she had not had the same effect on Percy. His eyes momentarily rested upon her, and then he continued looking at all of the other guests in attendance. Looking back, Lydia supposed that she should have admired that about him (for it meant that he did not favour just one person), but at that moment, she had longed for him to look at her for even a moment longer.

Lydia looked at herself in the mirror and wondered if a face like hers would have entranced the duke in the first place. In her mind, her face was too plump, her ears too prominent, and her chin was nonexistent. In truth, Lydia had a heart-shaped face with a soft jawline.

Her eyes were a mysterious blue-grey, her nose sloped upwards pleasantly, and her lips were much fuller than Marianne's. When she

laughed, which she often did, but only genuinely in front of her family and friends, two small dimples appeared in the apples of her cheeks.

When she had stopped questioning her appearance for long enough to allow some of Marianne's chatter to filter in once more, she looked at her friend in the mirror just in time to hear her say, "But I suppose that isn't who you're really interested in, is it? I bet you're wondering about our beloved Duke of Wexley."

Lydia whipped her head around to face Marianne, who was smiling as though she had a secret. "Why ever should I care if Percy Wentworth is going to be in attendance?" she demanded.

Marianne patted her hair pompously and did not meet Lydia's eye. "Because I couldn't remember his name, but figured that if he had been on your mind, you would know exactly what it was!"

Lydia gasped but eventually joined in on Marianne's fun. "Oh, I see how you devised that jest. Very clever, my friend, very clever. I suppose I *might* have been thinking about the Duke. Do ... do you happen to know if he ..."

"Of course he will," Marianne interrupted her, strutting in front of her to have Lydia do up the back of her dress. "He and his family are almost contractually obligated to attend every one of these things. I would be more surprised if he weren't there tonight!"

As Lydia fastened the buttons on Marianne's delicate red gown, she found herself beginning to struggle. Her heart had begun beating faster, her cheeks were feeling flushed, and it had somehow magically become warmer in the room in the last few minutes. But Lydia knew that this kind of girlish crushing was infantile, and so she forced

herself to take her task seriously. She finished doing up Marianne's buttons and then set to putting on her own dress.

"Thank you for that information. I shall consider it and decide what I will do with it," Lydia said, attempting to come off casually. Marianne, however, immediately caught her out and laughed.

"Decide what to do with it?!" Marianne cried loudly. Lydia simply adored her more outgoing, vivacious friend, but occasionally Marianne was too excitable even for Lydia. "I know very well what you will do with it, and that is you shall spend the night pining for him! But perhaps ... this might be the night that your feelings are reciprocated."

Marianne had just finished helping Lydia into her dress and guided her over to the mirror to have a look at herself. Even though Lydia was not one to like the way her reflection looked, she had to admit that she did look quite radiant.

The dress consisted of a silk imitation that had Lydia not known it was not the real thing, she would have thought the dress cost a year's earnings to buy. Marianne had also lent her the finest yellow jewels that she had, which, although they were small, still brought Lydia's outfit together in a delightful manner.

"Thank you ever so much for lending me these," Lydia complimented her friend, but Marianne wouldn't have it.

"Do not use this time to thank me, Lydia!" she scolded her. "Admire yourself. Feel the presence that this dress gives you. Inhabit the confidence that looking as splendid as you do should. And know that a man like Percy Wentworth would only be so lucky as to fall in love

with a woman like you.”

Lydia didn't know what came over her, but as she heard Marianne's kind words in her ears, she began tearing up. Marianne saw the tears immediately, of course, and embraced her from behind. “No crying, though, Lyddie,” Marianne joked, “for this illusion shall be ruined if you show up with puffy eyes and tear-stained cheeks!”

Lydia burst out laughing and turned around to give her friend a real hug. “Thank you, Annie, truly,” she whispered in her ear.

When the women broke apart, Marianne took Lydia's hand and said, “Come now. We have gentlemen to bowl over and a ball to be at the centre of! And I should remind you to never, *ever*, call me that name again.”

The two young women went scurrying down the stairs, where their chaperones and carriages awaited. Lydia couldn't help feeling that this evening was going to be a special one, even if she did not catch the eye of the handsome Duke.

Chapter 2

Outside of the ball, Percy Wentworth was struggling to do up the cuffs of his shirt. At the last minute before leaving his estate, he had discovered that the shirt he had intended to wear was too small, and that left him with only his back-up dress shirt.

When he put it on, he had forgotten that he had not asked the family's seamstress to put a new button on the cuff, and so now he was trying to work something out with the sleeve of his shirt and the button of his jacket. It was not, however, working.

Just as he was about to tear his cuff off in frustration, Percy looked up and saw a familiar figure making his way towards him.

"What ho, good chap!" Lewis Crawford shouted at his closest friend, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. "Trying to tear off your clothes before you've even met a handsome lady this evening?"

"Good lord, man," Percy hissed at him, "keep your voice down. You can make your amorous jokes later, but for now, you must contain yourself."

Lewis tilted his head back in laughter and put his hand upon his stomach. "Contain myself? What do you take me for, a society man such as yourself? If such a day should ever come, I give you my consent to take me out to pasture and put an end to my misery."

Lewis tossed back his hair dramatically, and Percy couldn't help laughing. Lewis was, indeed, a society man, as his parents were the Duke and Duchess of Flamborough.

However, the moment that he was out of whatever ball, gathering, or dinner he had been forced to attend, his boyish, playful side revealed itself immediately. He was a handsome young man with black hair, olive skin, and brown eyes, and stood a few inches taller than Percy.

"Then perhaps we should just skip this event altogether so that you are not tempted to be well-mannered. Shall we make our exit presently?" Percy asked, jokingly making his way back to his carriage.

"Come on, then," Lewis halted him, coming around in front of him. "Don't allow your anxiety to get the better of you. And do not make it worse by pinning your escape on me! There may be some fine ladies here this evening, and all of them would be overjoyed to make your acquaintance."

Lewis puckered up his lips, sucked in his stomach, and mock-curtseyed at him. "Oh, *you're* the Duke of Wexley," Lewis said in a high-pitched voice. "How strapping you are! Allow me to show you my affection by steering you towards this broom closet!"

Lewis started prancing towards Percy, flapping his hands adoringly, and Percy pushed him away, making sounds of horror. The two young men laughed together, and then Percy collected himself enough to enter the ball with his outgoing, somewhat boisterous friend by his side.

When they entered the hall, Percy was instantly overwhelmed by the

number of people, the smells, the sounds, and the heat they were all creating together. This was one of the many reasons why he didn't enjoy society balls: he constantly felt over-stimulated and as though he needed to escape more and more with every moment.

However, he knew that his friend wanted him to be there, and he also had another, more important reason for being at the ball, and so he pushed through his initial anxiety and put on his brave face.

Right at that moment, Lydia and Marianne arrived at the ball with their chaperones. Marianne was not fond of her chaperone, an older spinster named Gertrude who wore drab old gowns and constantly appeared to have just finished sucking on a lemon.

She had wiry grey hair, but she had a face that told Lydia that when she was younger, she would have been a very fine lady indeed. However, her looks could never make up for the rotting apple core that was her soul, and so Lydia could understand why she had ended up alone, as horrible as that sounded.

Lydia's chaperone, on the other hand, was so beloved by the Seymour family that Lydia considered her to be her aunt. Mabel Wainthrop was a widowed woman in her fifties who was almost more maternal than Lydia's own mother.

She kept up with the fashions and trends of the day, even though she was not in society very often anymore, and tonight was no exception. She was wearing a charming brown dress that made her look quite lovely and had a single feather protruding from her hair.

When Mabel saw Lydia looking at her, she said, "Oh dear. You have that look upon your face. Do I have some food on my cheek that I did

not see before we left, Lyddie?”

“Not a spot! I don’t think any crumbs would have the gall to remain on your face, dear Mabel. Now on Gertrude’s face, on the other hand ...” Both women looked over to where Gertrude was chastising Marianne about something or other, and much to Lydia’s delight, they could see that she did have one streak of brown protruding from the corner of her mouth. It seemed that eating dinner had not been as simple a task for Gertrude that evening.

Mabel stifled her laughter entirely, but Lydia allowed herself a good chuckle.

“Now, now,” Mabel gently reminded her, “we mustn’t be too mean to dear old Gertrude. What if she hears us? You shall fare all right, but I have to spend much of the evening with her! Imagine my despair!”

That only made Lydia laugh harder, which garnered her some jealous looks from Marianne, who was still being scolded. “Now you go along and talk to some of the people that you know here; I shall make myself quite comfortable somewhere that I can see you, but please let me know if you’re heading into another room.”

Lydia thanked her profusely and then ran to grab Marianne’s hand and rescue her from Gertrude. She knew exactly how lucky she was when it came to chaperones, for Mabel was one of a kind. She could not imagine what her entry into society would have been like had it not been for her, and she did feel slightly guilty that Marianne had to contend with Gertrude all the time.

When Marianne and Lydia had found their place in the crowd, they began catching up with some of their relations who were in

attendance, and they had not seen for some time. Marianne then quickly became aware that a dance was about to start, and so she began doing what she did best – making a show of herself to the men around her.

It worked like a charm, and not one minute later, she had an appropriately high-class young man leading her towards the dance floor. Lydia cheered her on in her mind and then looked to see what Gertrude thought of her dance partner. For once, she seemed almost contented.

While Lydia was very happy that her friend was getting a chance to dance, she admitted to herself that she was slightly disappointed that no fine young gentlemen had asked her to dance with them. She consoled herself by thinking of Percy and momentarily dreaming about the possibility of him being in attendance. She thought of his fine eyes, his enchanting smile, the way his laughter tumbled out of his body like water over the rocks in a warm stream ...

Amid her daydream, however, Lydia did not notice that people were rushing past her in every direction, and eventually, one of them bumped into her. Lydia stumbled but was caught by a strong hand that prevented her from falling.

“Oh!” she said instinctively when she was struck.

“I am so very sorry, Miss, do forgive me. I do hope that you are well ... are you?” the person who had bumped her said. Lydia finally regained her balance enough to look up and see who it was who had collided with her, and much to her equal delight and mortification, she saw that it was Percy Wentworth.

The moment their eyes met, Lydia's cheeks went redder than a ripe apple. Her heart began racing, her thoughts began swimming, and she could not rightly form any semblance of a sentence for the time being. And so for what felt like an eternity, Lydia just stared at Percy silently, and he continued looking at her with care and concern on his face.

Finally, Lydia regained her faculties enough to respond.

"Sorry!" she shouted rather loudly, and Percy jolted upon hearing her volume. "I ... I'm quite well, thank you. How are you?"

"Don't worry about me, it was my two left feet that got us into this situation in the first place," Percy responded, smiling in such a way that made Lydia positively melt. It was at this moment, however, that both parties realized they were touching. Percy and Lydia's eyes both went to their hands, and when they saw that they were still holding onto one another, they immediately broke apart.

Lydia tried to stay calm and keep her emotions in check but found it increasingly difficult. She could not believe that not only was Percy in attendance tonight, but he was also talking to her. She could not have dreamed up a more perfect meeting between the two of them. This was everything she had ever hoped for, and she wasn't going to let some insignificant thing like her emotions ruin it.

They stood slightly apart for a little longer, their attention wandering from each other to the dancers a short distance from them. Lydia tried to take in deep breaths and reassure herself that this was normal, and she could do it.

She was not, however, going to be the one to re-start the conversation. Although she was bold, she was not *that* bold, and she knew her place

in the world. It was Percy's responsibility to speak if he wanted the two of them to talk.

"Have we met before?" Percy finally ended up saying rather casually. Out of the corner of her eye, Lydia could see that he was still watching the dancers and not making eye contact with her, and so she followed his lead.

"I don't believe that I've had the pleasure of making your acquaintance," Lydia lied. She figured that it might frighten Percy to suddenly have this woman who remembered every detail of the single interaction they'd had as children. So, instead of telling him the truth, she allowed herself the chance for a better introduction.

Percy tore his eyes away from the dancers and faced Lydia.

He bowed low with his head tucked and said, "I'm the Duke of Wexley, Percy Wentworth."

Lydia curtsied as low as she could to show her admiration for Percy, and then responded, "I'm Lydia Seymour, daughter of Rodrick Seymour, the doctor."

Upon hearing her father's name, Percy's eyebrow shot up. "You're the daughter of Dr Seymour? I hear he's a very fine man and an even finer doctor. That is a fascinating profession. Do you ever have the chance to accompany him on his rounds?"

Lydia felt her interest in Percy blooming in her chest as a sunflower would in the summertime. She could not believe that her mouth had

cooperated for long enough to introduce herself without stuttering, muttering, or generally stumbling over herself. She could believe even less that Percy was showing any interest in, of all things, her father's profession.

However, Lydia was actually quite fond of her father's work, so she was delighted to speak about it, especially with him. "I've visited a great number of patients with him over the years. Father says that the families he tends to are always happier to see him when I come along, but I think that he might just be saying that because he likes my assistance."

"Have you really?" Percy replied, looking genuinely interested. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and knitted his brows together as if that would help him to focus on what Lydia was saying more intently. "Miss Seymour, this is a very impertinent question to ask a young woman, especially one who I have just met, but I simply must know; what are your father's thoughts on bloodletting?"

Lydia took in a hesitant breath and did not answer. Many, many physicians widely practiced bloodletting, and it was the expected treatment for a great many ailments. Lydia knew precisely how her father felt about it, but she was hesitant to explain as she did not wish to alienate the man who she had longed to pursue for many years. She decided to reply with, "How do you feel about it?"

Percy sighed and bobbed his head from side to side, looking back and forth as he did. "My opinion is not a popular one, which is why I have longed to hear what your father thinks on the subject, for I know he is a well-respected, intelligent man. But since I asked, I suppose I shan't force you to speak about it first. Quite frankly, I think it is barbaric, and we should abolish the practice of it entirely."

Lydia let out a huge sigh of relief. "That is precisely how my father

and I feel. And as we are amid an improper topic of conversation, I shall explain why we feel that way.”

Upon seeing the way that Percy was eating up every word she said in regards to bloodletting, Lydia launched into her re-telling of the night that she and her father had been called to attend a birth at the Inverwyld residence. This was far from common practice. Dr Seymour met a great deal of resistance from the male members of the household upon his arrival, but when he laid eyes on the young woman labouring, Ethel by name, he immediately attended to her.

Ethel was suffering from an unknown illness. She kept wailing about the pounding in her head, the painful swelling in her ankles, and that she could not keep any food down to give her strength.

Dr Seymour attempted bloodletting in a final attempt to save the life of both the mother and the baby, but it only exacerbated the problems. Ethel had died while giving birth, and the baby had been lost in the process. Lydia’s father swore off bloodletting from then on.

When Lydia completed telling her story in the most delicate way she could, she looked at Percy expectantly. She prayed that she had not gone into too much gory detail about the incident, but was also very aware that speaking of death during the first conversation with a potential suitor was just ... unheard of.

However, Percy was utterly engaged. “I am so dreadfully sorry that happened to your father, but I am encouraged to know that he no longer practices that ‘cure’. If he had attended to my father on the night of his death, he might still be here today.”

Lydia was taken aback. *How is it that we are speaking about death and*

loss in our first conversation together, and yet I have never felt as instantly connected with anyone in my life? He's being so open and vulnerable, should I ask him more about his father?

Lydia did not have time to respond, however, as at that moment, another good-looking young man approached Percy from behind. "Percy!" the young man cried as he passed. "I wasn't expecting to see you here tonight, or I'd have brought you that book you lent me."

Percy cocked his head slightly to one side and looked at the young man sideways.

"I loaned you a book? Which one?"

"You know," the man responded, "that silly one about the potential for using small doses of illnesses in the body to try and immunize the individual against a more virulent form of the disease? I don't believe a word of it, but it is good for a laugh!"

With that, the young man continued on his way. Had Percy been facing Lydia, he would have seen her eyes positively light up.

"I know exactly what book he is speaking of!" she cried.

Percy whirled around and stared at her. "You do?"

Lydia nodded emphatically. "Yes, it's by that Jenner, fellow! I cannot remember the title, but my father had a copy in his possession for a

time as well. I only read a few sections of it, but I was enthralled by the idea.”

With that as their jumping-off point, Lydia and Percy continued speaking together for the rest of the dance. They were so engaged in conversation that neither of them noticed their usual anxieties, instead putting their energy into trying to remember the names of influential doctors.

“And that is why I believe Dr Jenner’s hypothesis to be a brilliant one,” Percy finished after a moment.

“I agree entirely,” Lydia said. “His thoughts on the matter are unparalleled, and I ...”

As Lydia was watching Percy, however, a strange look came across his face. He looked just past her and went rather pale. Lydia instantly knew that she had said something wrong, for Percy seemed to suddenly have zero interest in what she was saying.

“I must be going,” Percy said in a standoffish manner. He physically, but gently, pushed Lydia aside, walked right by her, and disappeared into the crowd without a single backwards glance. She could hardly believe what had just transpired, felt tears collecting in her eyes, but did not allow them to spring forth. Instead, she turned on her heel and went to find Marianne.

Chapter 3

“This story becomes stranger by the moment, Lyddie!” Marianne cried as the two girls sat in the carriage on the ride home. “First, you tell me that you stumbled, quite literally, into the duke you’ve adored for years, then you tell me that the first thing you discuss is *death*, of all things, and then you say he physically brushed you to the side and did not even bother to finish your conversation? I ... I am at a loss for words!” Marianne flopped dramatically against the back of the carriage, placing her hand upon her forehead as though she was feeling faint. “How could you bring all of this upon me at once? This is too much for my weak disposition!”

Lydia, on the other hand, was only feeling angry. She couldn’t believe that she had let herself be swept off her feet by this man who obviously cared nothing for her and did not actually care about *her* opinion of medicine, only her father’s.

When he had pushed her to the side, it was a rather rude awakening, but a very necessary one in Lydia’s mind. She was a very pragmatic person, and so it was easy to keep her mind focused on forgetting about a man like Percy Wentworth once she set herself to the task.

“If you have a weak disposition,” Lydia countered her, “then I am a wilting flower. We both know exactly why Percy began speaking with me, and why he so suddenly brushed me off. He had received the opinions of my father from me, and then no longer felt a need to be polite to me. I should have remembered my place in society more acutely so that I would not have had to suffer a moment’s embarrassment at his selfish behaviour.”

Marianne snapped out of her dramatic daydream and sat up straighter against the back cushion. "I suppose you are correct, even if I am loathing admitting it, my dear." Most of Marianne's hairstyle had come undone by now, giving her a rather haggard look. "I did not want to believe that a man like Percy could be so shockingly shallow.

Lydia let out a quiet scoff and then replied, "Neither did I. I thought that he was the generous, kind boy that I had met so many years ago ... but perhaps life was not as kind to him as it has been to me, and that has changed him." Lydia thought back to the moment where Percy had ever so briefly mentioned his father and wondered if his death may have had anything to do with his rude behaviour.

Marianne smiled appreciatively at her. "You always have a way of seeing things in a kind light, don't you, Lydia?"

"Just because I am saying we should take a walk in Percy's shoes before we judge him does not mean that I excuse any of the behaviour he exhibited tonight. My kindness can only be extended so far," Lydia replied.

"I understand," said Marianne. "Well then, shall we put this Percy situation to bed and perhaps focus on finding you a gentleman who would be far superior to him? You deserve only the best man, and I do not believe Percy is generous enough to fill those shoes!" Lydia laughed, and the two young women spent the rest of the carriage ride discussing the possible suitors that Lydia could dance with at the next ball, which was in the not too distant future.

Meanwhile, in a much grander carriage travelling back towards the Wentworth estate, Percy had harsh words with his younger sister, Georgiana, about her behaviour that evening.

“You know full well that Arthur Middleton is not a man to be socializing with,” he scolded her. “Mama and I have had words with you many times about his reputation, and if you continue being seen with him in public ...”

“You’ll do what, exactly?” Georgiana challenged him. She may have been ten years younger than her brother, but she was almost twice as bold. She had striking red hair, green eyes, and a spritely figure.

When she fixed her eyes on someone, they were never sure if she was pleased to see them or about to explode. And to be honest, Georgiana was never truly certain either. “You are not Papa, and while you may try to control my life and my relations as best as you can, you cannot stop me from being with the man that I love.”

Percy took in a deep, calming breath. Or it would have been calming if it had had any effect on him whatsoever. Instead, it only made him more furious with his sister.

]”Georgiana, you cannot say that you love Arthur, for you barely know him. If you did, you would have a better understanding of what a vile, abhorrent man he is. He is over twice your age, has had multiple romantic attachments with women of all classes over the last few years, and has ruined the reputations of many of those women. I cannot understand how he is still invited to many of these balls, and you must not associate yourself with him any further. Do you understand me?” Percy looked at his sister expectantly, but his admonishment had not seemed to have taken.

“I do not,” she said defiantly. “It is up to me to decide if Arthur is a man worthy of my affections, and I shall not allow the opinion of society to sway me. In all of the interactions that I have had with him, Arthur has been courteous, kind, and the smartest man I have ever

met. I refuse to believe a word you are saying.” Georgiana turned away from her brother and looked out the window. “I think the real reason why you are upset with me is because you saw me talking with Arthur when you were speaking to that beautiful peasant girl, and if you hadn’t been charged with watching me tonight, you might have been able to begin courting her.”

Percy could physically feel himself becoming defensive of Lydia.

“Georgiana,” he practically growled, “she is *not* a peasant girl, she is the daughter of the doctor who saved your life, and I should hope that you would treat her with more respect than that. I am appalled that you would speak of her in such a poor manner. I thought you were better than that.”

Percy noticed that his sister’s shoulders did droop slightly, and some of the tension that had been residing in her body left it momentarily, but she still did not turn to face her brother or try to apologize.

“How was I to know that?” Georgiana countered. “I’d never seen her before in my life, and she was dressed like a peasant, and so I called her one. I believe that we should call people for what they are ... shouldn’t we?”

Georgiana finally turned around and gave Percy a prideful look. Percy could feel rage bubbling in his stomach, as Georgiana had just used one of his own quotes against him.

“Not in this way,” Percy replied gruffly. “When I said that—”

“There he goes, backpedalling as quickly as he can,” Georgiana mumbled.

Percy gripped the side of his seat in frustration but did not allow himself any sort of outburst at his sister. He was not that kind of man, and he did not want to show his younger sister that lashing out at someone was an appropriate way for a man to process anger.

And so, Percy dropped the subject. He had been furious that he had both been pulled away from his conversation with Lydia Seymour who, although they had only met that evening, he had taken quite a liking to, and that Georgiana had not heeded his warnings about Arthur. He decided to speak with his mother about what had transpired that evening to see if she had any advice on the matter. Verity Wentworth was a very wise, level-headed woman, and Percy knew that she would know exactly what to do in this situation.

Percy and Georgiana spent the rest of the ride in angry silence, and as soon as they pulled up in front of the estate, Georgiana was out of the carriage faster than Percy could even get his door open. When he finally got himself out into the crisp night air, he saw Georgiana tearing into the manor and out of sight.

He was grateful not to have to look after her anymore but did feel rather unresolved about the fight they’d had. Although it may not have seemed it in the carriage, Georgiana and Percy typically enjoyed quite an amiable relationship, and he was saddened to have had such a falling out over Arthur Middleton.

As Percy thanked the driver for his service and walked inside towards his bedroom, he went over the evening in his mind. Although he had not initially wished to attend, he had been having quite a pleasant time, right up until his sister spoiled it.

Most of all, his thoughts drifted to Lydia and the engaging, thrilling conversation that they had shared. He hoped that he had not made it seem as though it was only her father's opinion that he cared about; upon discovering how intelligent she was, he had wanted to know her thoughts as well.

And then, Percy remembered how they had parted. He could barely recall what they had been talking about when he spotted Georgiana and remembered his promise to his mother that he would watch her that evening. Unfortunately, he had been so intent upon reaching his sister as quickly as possible before she made any more of a fool of herself that he had actually pushed Lydia to the side and muttered some sort of farewell.

You fool! Percy cursed himself as he opened the heavy wooden door leading to his bedroom. *You pushed her to the side, mumbled farewell, and did not explain to her why you had to take your leave of her? She probably thinks you the worst man to have ever walked this earth! You had better hope that you run into her so that you might apologize profusely; otherwise, you might never see her again.*

Percy began getting undressed in preparation for bed and did his best not to think too hard about Lydia or how their interaction had finished that evening. He promised himself that he would find a way to see Lydia again and make it up to her.

Chapter 4

“I agree with you wholeheartedly, Marianne,” Mabel said to Lydia’s best friend a few days after the ball. “I do not think that if Percy Wentworth behaved in that manner towards Lydia, he is worthy of her. I think that a new *chapeau* might be exactly what she needs to lift her spirits and remind her what a magnificent young woman she is!”

Marianne positively cheered and clapped her hands when Mabel finished speaking, and Lydia couldn’t help blushing. They were walking down the main street of town that was brimming with exciting shops for the young women and Lydia’s chaperone to explore.

Lydia had not got to town many times when she was younger, as her father was only starting out with his practice. But now that Dr Seymour was well-established, the family had a bit more disposable income, and so Lydia was able to buy frivolous things like a new hat.

As they walked, Lydia couldn’t help being distracted by the displays in the front windows. As they passed the bakery, the tempting smell of freshly baked bread and pastries wafted out of the front door when a customer opened it. There were bath buns sitting on a platter, enticing all those who passed to come inside and try one.

Then, they passed a store that had a window full of dazzling fabrics. There were colours and patterns that Lydia had not been aware were possible before seeing them, and she found herself tempted to go inside and order herself a new dress. But although the Seymour family had enough money to afford new hats, they were not rich enough for Lydia to buy a new dress every time she felt like it.

Finally, Lydia's focus drifted back to the conversation that Mabel and Marianne were having, but it was only in time for the three of them to come upon the hat shop. The conversation immediately ceased as the women became enchanted by all of the possibilities for new chapeaus that were hanging around the shop. There seemed to be a hat in every colour possible, and there were so many styles to choose from that Lydia instantly became overwhelmed.

"Good afternoon, ladies," the store owner, a tall, thin man with a small pair of spectacles resting upon his nose, greeted them. "Which one of you lucky young women is here to choose a new hat? Or is it perhaps a gift for someone?"

Mabel pointed to Lydia, who immediately regretted being the only person present who was buying a hat. She did not like having all of the focus on her, and she knew that the store owner would soon be bombarding her with questions about exactly which hat she wanted.

She was about to explain that she was not very picky when it came to her hats when she heard the door to the shop chime. She turned to take a quick glance and see who was in there with them when her heart stopped. It was the Duke of Wexley, Percy Wentworth.

Lydia's eyes widened, and she looked to Marianne, panicked. Marianne had not yet noticed the other person in the shop or the look on Lydia's face, and so Lydia had to clear her throat to get her attention. When Marianne finally looked at her, Lydia gestured with a toss of her head towards Percy, and then her friend's look mirrored her own.

However, none of the three women had any time to prepare what they were going to say to Percy, as he spied them immediately. It was quite

a small shop, so that was not surprising, but Lydia wished that there was a way she could just dissolve into the wallpaper so that she did not have to speak with him again, especially so soon after the ball.

Percy darted over to the three women, and Lydia was surprised by his determination.

“Do excuse me, ladies,” he interrupted politely, “but I believe I owe one of you an apology.”

At once, Mabel protected her charge.

“Good afternoon, sir,” she greeted him tightly. “I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. I am Mabel Wainthrop, Lydia Seymour’s chaperone. And you are ...”

Percy seemed to tell from the tone of Mabel’s voice that she knew he had done something wrong.

“I am Percy Wentworth, the Duke of Wexley.” He offered a bow to Mabel. She did not return it with a curtsy, likely as she had already introduced herself, but Lydia was highly amused by that. Mabel was always polite, respectful, and generous, but the moment that anyone was unkind or rude to someone that she cared about, it took a great deal of work for them to regain her respect.

“I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Seymour at the ball the other night,” he said, removing his top hat as he spoke. “We were having a most interesting conversation about the practice of medicine when I was suddenly pulled away.” He turned his attention entirely on Lydia,

looked into her eyes, and said, "I apologize profusely for abruptly departing from you; that was very rude of me."

Lydia was initially very impressed by this apology. She was glad that Percy had recognized how rude he had been to her, and he spoke very well. However, she then realized that while Percy had apologized, he had not explained why someone had called him away so suddenly.

Lydia wasn't sure what to say, but then she remembered how bold Mabel had been in front of Percy and so decided to follow in her footsteps.

"That is very kind of you, thank you," she said, bowing her head. "If this is not too impertinent a question to ask, what called you away?"

Percy looked taken aback, and for a moment, Lydia was certain she had pushed the conversation too far. She looked to Marianne to see what she thought of all this, but thankfully Marianne's facial expression told Lydia exactly what she needed to hear: *good for you!* If she hadn't been standing right in front of Percy at that point, she would have laughed at Marianne's expression, but she managed to control herself.

"No, no," Percy assured her, "that isn't impertinent at all. My only regret is that I cannot elaborate upon why I was called away ... I just had to leave."

That was all Percy had to say about that, and Lydia was left feeling uneasy about the whole situation. She didn't want to press him anymore on the topic, as she knew she had been *very* bold to ask him in the first place. Marianne then jumped into the conversation as she could see that Lydia was floundering, and the four of them then

chatted idly about the weather and the rain that seemed to be threatening to pour down at any moment.

They were interrupted when the owner of the hat store returned.

“Ah, Percy, how good it is to see you,” the store owner said, and Lydia was shocked by the informality of the greeting. She assumed Percy must have been a frequent customer; otherwise, the store owner would have referred to him by a more formal name. “When I saw you come in, I went and fetched your order. I do hope that it is everything she wants.”

The store owner handed a hat box over to Percy, who seemed to be going red in the face. Lydia looked at the box for a few moments and turned over what the store owner had said in her head.

Fetched your order ... hope that it is everything she wants ...

And then, it hit her. Percy had obviously ordered the hat he had just received for the woman who he was courting. He must have only been feigning interest in talking to Lydia at the ball, and then when he spied the woman who he was really meant to be with, he pushed Lydia to the side and went to be with her.

But as Lydia thought about who the young woman could have possibly been, she could not figure it out for the life of her. She thought back to the crowd of people who had been standing in front of her and Percy when they had been talking, and there were almost no young women around his age or of the correct social status. She was positively perplexed but figured there must have been someone who she hadn't seen.

“Thank you, Mr Dorrington,” Percy said sheepishly, awkwardly trying to hold and hide the box. “You always do such fine work that I am sure she will love it.”

Mr Dorrington nodded curtly and then disappeared into the back of his shop, leaving Marianne, Mabel, and Lydia staring at Percy. He looked at each of them one by one and generally appeared very uncomfortable.

“Well,” he said quietly. “I shall say once more that I feel positively awful for my behaviour the other night, and I very much appreciate you accepting my apology.”

Lydia nodded absent-mindedly and gave him a hollow smile.

“Of course, Your Grace,” she replied. As she watched Percy’s face, she saw that he went from looking relieved to unsettled. It seemed that he did not buy her acceptance of his apology, but Lydia did not want to continue talking to him, especially not with Marianne and Mabel around. “Well, good day then,” Lydia said abruptly and pulled Marianne further into the shop, away from Percy.

“You can let go of me now,” Marianne said once they were out of earshot. Lydia let go of the vice grip that she had on her friend’s arm and flexed her hands a few times. “We both know that hat was for a woman, don’t we?”

Lydia nodded emphatically.

“What a venomous man,” she growled. “I would bet that he only apologized to me because he bumped into us here today. Had that not happened, I don’t believe I ever would have heard from him again. That was such a hollow apology; he didn’t even explain why he had to go! And then that hat, oh that hat! It is obviously for the woman he is courting, and so that means he had absolutely no interest in talking with me at the ball! He just keeps getting worse and worse!”

Marianne rubbed her upper shoulder. “Do I ever understand that! When he was so vague about what had drawn him away from you, I knew something had to be up. Do you think that he is courting a woman in secret? Is that why he did not say exactly what had happened?”

Lydia glanced around to make doubly sure that Percy was no longer in the shop, which he was not. Mabel was presently engaged with Mr Dorrington, and so Lydia felt safe continuing talking with Marianne.

“That makes complete sense,” she whispered to Marianne. “He’s been seeing someone in secret, and so he could have also started talking to me to make it look to everyone around us that there was a young woman he was courting ... it just wasn’t the right one.”

Marianne’s eyes widened. “You think he might have been using the conversation with you to make people think he was courting you instead of the mystery woman? I cannot imagine how a man could get any worse!”

Lydia sighed.

“This has only succeeded in proving to me that I should continue to

forget about Percy and replace him with someone, anyone, who is better than he is!" she cried a little too loudly. She felt eyes upon her, and when she turned to look at Mabel and Mr Dorrington, they were both looking back at her. Both she and Marianne smiled and waved at them, and then picked out a hat each to pretend to admire.

"That shall not be a difficult challenge, my dear," Marianne responded. "Percy has set the bar so low for your future husband that I am afraid you will accept the first reasonable man who comes along!"

Lydia laughed. "Don't fret, my friend," she reassured her. "After this experience, I shall be looking for a man who checks off all of my boxes when it comes to a future husband. I will be very, very picky."

Marianne seemed happy with that response, and the two young women ceased their gossip about Percy. They proceeded to have a lovely time in the haberdashery, and Lydia placed an order on a very beautiful yellow hat that suited her quite well.

Chapter 5

When Percy arrived at home, he went straight to Georgiana's room. He pounded on the ornate wooden door, as he was still quite upset with her after the events that unfolded at the ball.

When he heard nothing in response, he shouted, "Georgiana? Open the door this minute."

There was still no response, but now Percy was convinced this was not because his sister was ignoring him, it was because she simply was not in her room. He charged down the hallway and up the stairs to the conservatory, where Georgiana was gently tending to her many varieties of exotic plants.

When he saw her, he tossed the hat box at her without saying anything. Georgiana thankfully looked up in time to stop the box from hitting her and managed to catch it, but she was both annoyed and surprised.

"You great bull calf!" she shouted at him. "You very nearly destroyed my Laurestinus, and if you had, you would have been in a world of pain!"

Percy rolled his eyes at his petulant sister.

"Your hat arrived," he responded flatly, taking no notice of what she

had said. "I think you chose the worst colour and style possible, by the way."

Georgiana sighed and tossed off her gardening gloves while still managing to hold her hatbox.

"Then it is a good thing you know absolutely nothing about style, brother dearest," she said, her voice dripping with malice, "for if you did, you would know that this hat is in the height of fashion right now. And I shan't thank you for picking it up, as you stole a trip into town from me, you lobcock."

"Don't use that language," Percy scolded her. "If Mama hears you, then I'll be blamed for teaching it to you when the truth is that I never speak that way."

Georgiana turned away from her brother to set the hatbox down upon a table at the end of the row of plants. As Percy watched her take the hat out of the box and put it on her head, he became aware of the heat and humidity in the conservatory.

He never understood his sister's intense fascination with plants, nor could he see why she loved spending a great many hours in here each day, carefully tending to each of her species.

In almost everything else in her life, Georgiana moved very quickly and rather thoughtlessly. However, when it came to plants, she was patient, understanding, and enthralled by them. Percy truthfully admired Georgiana's behaviour in the conservatory, and so he did his best to refrain from teasing her about that specifically.

When Georgiana had the hat upon her head, she looked quite contented. Suddenly, Percy almost enjoyed seeing his sister so happy, and their ongoing feud was put to the side for the time being. In her outfit, Georgiana looked like a child who had been playing outside in the dirt in her worst clothes, and who had then played dress-up with her mother's hat.

"You have a sour look on your face, brother," Georgiana said in a softer, but still rather harsh tone. "There is something about it that tells me your annoyance hasn't completely been caused by me."

Percy did not feel like revealing his feelings to his bothersome little sister, but as she was the only person who he consistently saw in a day, she frustratingly was also his confidante.

"While you are largely the cause of it," Percy informed her, "you are correct. I ran into a young woman who I spoke with at the ball when I went into the haberdashery."

Georgiana looked surprised. She took the hat from her head and placed it back in the box while she spoke.

"Was it that blonde-haired peasant ... I mean that blonde-haired young woman?" she asked.

Percy took a seat on one of the stools nearby. "Yes. Her name is Lydia Seymour; she's the daughter of ..."

"The doctor who attended to Mama the night I was born and saved me

from dying of pleurisy,” Georgiana interrupted. “You already told me that.”

“Yes, right,” Percy responded, rubbing his temples. The overwhelming smell of all the plants was starting to get to him, and he wasn’t sure how much longer he could stay in here.

“We had a wonderful conversation the night of the ball, but then when I apologized to her today for leaving so abruptly, she seemed to want nothing to do with me. There was something in her face that told me she didn’t entirely believe my apology.”

Georgiana came and sat on another stool a little way down from where Percy sat. “Well, did you show her that you were sorry?” she asked, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Percy knitted his eyebrows, drew his head back away from her and crossed his arms. “Show her I was sorry? Why should I need to do that? If I say I am sorry, then I mean it.” He did not understand how an intelligent young woman like Lydia could not understand that he was being truthful in his apology.

Georgiana let out a big sigh, leaned her head back, and then looked at her brother. “When you were drawn away by the sight of me speaking with Arthur, did you bid her farewell? Did you thank her for the conversation and tell her that you would very much enjoy the chance to continue it another time?”

“I did not have time to do that,” he barked. “I had to get to you as quickly as possible because if I didn’t, you would have ruined our whole family’s reputation in one fell swoop.”

It was now Georgiana's turn to roll her eyes.

"Don't give me that," she groaned. "You know that I was only speaking with Arthur and that there was nothing improper going on between us. I may be a rebellious young thing, but I do not wish to make such an outcast of myself that I would make any moves on Arthur *at a ball*. You were rude to Lydia. And now, you need to show her that you aren't really as rude as you seem ... at least to her."

There was a great deal to process in what Georgiana had said, but Percy did not want to focus on much of it. Instead, he honed in on what she had said about his relationship with Lydia and decided to fend off his initial instinct of becoming defensive.

"You're sure this is what she wants?" he asked her seriously. "This isn't one of your attempts to ruin my social life?"

Georgiana chuckled. "Brother dear, I thought you knew me well enough by now to know that if I wanted to do that, I would be taking far more extreme measures than simply giving you advice about a young woman. Contrary to popular opinion, I actually like the look of this girl, and so I believe that there might be a way – some small, shining hope – that you might be able to salvage your relationship with her."

Percy was quiet for a moment, looking down at his hands and playing with his fingers. He found it so surprising how he and Georgiana could go from wanting to tear each other's throats out to discussing Percy's love life in the same visit. But when he thought of that, he realized that he had been speaking to his sister as though he was thinking about courting Miss Seymour. And that was dangerous.

“You know that I am only speaking to you about this as I believe Miss Seymour and I could become good friends, right?” Percy checked with his sister.

She arched an eyebrow at him, but then nodded half-heartedly. “Oh yes indeed,” Georgiana said sarcastically. “I truly believe that you only want to be friends with this gorgeous young woman who you can discuss all of your boring medical theories with.”

“But that is the truth!” Percy tried to convince her. “Lydia and I ...”

“Lydia?” Georgiana interrupted him. “How informal. I’ve only ever heard you refer to women who you like by their first names.”

Percy could see that he was getting nowhere quickly with his conversation with his sister, and so he got up from his stool in a huff and started making for the door. When he reached it, however, he thought better of leaving without saying anything nice to her.

He turned around, looked at her perched proudly on her gardening stool with her dirty gardening gloves dangling from her knee, and said, “Your ... *calceolaria* is blooming nicely. You took care of it well.”

He saw the small smile on his sister’s face, and then went through the door to brood in his room about what they had discussed this afternoon.

Chapter 6

One week later, Percy was given the chance he so desired to speak with Lydia again: Lewis' birthday dinner. It turned out that Lydia was good friends with Marianne Haggerston, who Lewis' family was well acquainted with, and so both young women were set to be in attendance at tonight's dinner. When Percy found that out from Lewis, he tried desperately to hide his happiness, but his friend noticed right away.

"What is it with that look on your face, man?" Lewis demanded. "You look as though I've just told you that your future wife will be in attendance at tonight's dinner." Lewis studied him further, and then he figured it out. "My goodness, that's because you fancy one of them, don't you, you scoundrel?"

"Certainly not," Percy said gruffly. "I am only happy because those two tend to bring a great deal of ... fun with them wherever they go."

Lewis cocked his head to the side and placed the back of his hand on Percy's forehead.

"No, you're not feverish," he said, drawing his hand away. "But there must be something going on with you, for I don't believe I've ever heard you say a sentence like that in your life."

Percy began panicking. "I'm just happy, all right? I enjoy it when there are beautiful young women in attendance, and tonight is no exception. I was only happy to hear that they were coming, nothing

more.”

Lewis did not look as though he believed a single word that Percy was saying, but he nodded along with him. “If you say so.” He turned away from his friend and went back to preparing for the dinner that evening, much to Percy’s relief.

When it came time for the dinner to begin later on that evening, Percy tried to remain as nonchalant as possible while keeping an eye out for Lydia. He made idle conversation with the other guests, ate whatever was handed to him by Lewis and drank as slowly as he could so that he was not intoxicated by the time he ran into her. That was the last thing he needed right now.

The party had been going on for about an hour, and there was still no sign whatsoever of Lydia or Marianne. Percy was beginning to worry that Lydia had not wished to come because she knew that he would be in attendance. Guilt and disappointment started gnawing at his stomach as he stood by the back doors, pretending to admire the gardens.

Right at that moment, however, he saw Marianne’s reflection in the glass, and a second later, Lydia appeared beside her. Percy’s pulse began racing, and he did not know how he would be able to talk with her when there was so much on his mind that he needed to remember. But then, he saw Lydia spy him, and she did not seem to see that he was looking at her in the reflection. As she looked at him, a small, girlish smile came across her face, and Percy’s heart leapt.

If that is how she is looking at me when my back is turned, then perhaps I might have a chance with her after all!

Percy turned around slowly and pretended not to see Lydia at first. When his eyes finally landed on her, to his delight, he saw that she was still staring at him. She gave him a tiny wave, and then Percy carefully approached the two young women.

As he was walking over, he scanned the surrounding area for their chaperones and quickly spied them sitting on a bench a short distance away. When Lydia's chaperone, who he currently could not remember the name of, spied him, she did not look pleased. That only added to Percy's nerves, but he told himself that he had to try and talk to Lydia; otherwise, he would regret it for the rest of his life.

"Good evening Miss Seymour, Miss ..." To Percy's horror, he somehow managed to forget Marianne's last name, and so he just stared.

"Haggerston," she said, "but you can call me Miss Marianne as well, as I am the only daughter in my family." Marianne gave him an encouraging smile, which surprised him. He had worried that by now, she might have a very poor opinion of him, but to see her looking that way at him reassured him that he might still have a chance when it came to Lydia.

"Miss Haggerston," he said gratefully while looking at her. "My profuse apologies for forgetting your name like that."

Marianne crossed her arms and gave him a playful look. "It seems that you have something to apologize for each time we see you, Your Grace."

Percy chuckled. "You would be right about that, Miss Haggerston, but I do not plan on making it a habit any longer." Percy was proud of that response, and as he looked to Lydia, it seemed that he had

impressed her enough to warrant a conversation with her. "Might I draw you away for a moment? I promise I shall not take long."

Lydia nodded. "Certainly, Your Grace," she said rather formally, but there was something about the way she said it this time that seemed less ... annoyed. Perhaps Lydia had accepted his apology more and was now coming around to the idea of him.

The two young people walked away together, and immediately, Percy felt Mabel's eyes on him. He did not care, though, for he now had a bit more confidence in himself and knew that he would make a far better impression upon Lydia this time.

"How are you enjoying your evening so far?" Percy began casually.

"Quite well, thank you," Lydia responded, smoothing down some of her perfectly coiled hair. "I was very touched to have received an invitation. I did not think that Lewis was acquainted with me well enough to invite me, but it seems that I was wrong."

"He thinks quite highly of you and Miss Haggerston from what I can gather," Percy responded. "Although you may not be well acquainted, it is my opinion that he very much enjoys having the two of you at his gatherings as you bring a great deal of ... fun."

Percy knew that he was beginning to ramble, but he couldn't help himself. There was something about Lydia that made him feel nervous, even when he was feeling confident as he was now. Lydia, however, did not seem to mind. He would have loved to have known what was going through her mind right now so that he could stop overthinking every single thing that he did.

“That is very kind of him to think that,” Lydia said graciously. “Was there anything in particular that you wished to speak to me about, Your Grace?”

Percy knew he had to try to follow Georgiana’s recommendations and show Lydia that he was not a rude man, but he also felt compelled to apologize to her once more for his behaviour.

“Yes,” he managed to get out finally. The two of them had reached the other side of the room, where there was hardly anyone, and they could hear each other well. Percy was silently thanking Lewis for not inviting a thousand people to his birthday party so that he and Lydia could have a quiet moment alone together.

“I feel that I did not express myself fully when I stumbled into you at the haberdashery,” he explained. “Part of that was because I was too nervous to speak in front of your chaperone and Miss Haggerston, but another part was simply because I feared judgement.”

Lydia looked at him queerly. “Judgement? Why would I be judging you for anything?”

“Because,” Percy continued, “I truly did greatly enjoy the conversation, and the reason why I was so suddenly called away is one that I have been trying to keep quiet. If I were to share with you why I was drawn away, might you promise me to keep it to yourself?”

Lydia nodded slowly, looking rather confused. “Naturally. Anything that you tell me will stay between yourself and me. I have no intention of divulging it to anyone else.”

Percy felt a great deal of relief flood through him. "Thank you, Miss Seymour," he said. "You see, that evening as well as this one, I was charged with looking after ..."

But Percy trailed off, and his heart sank. Across the room, he saw his little sister once again in conversation with Arthur Middleton. Instantly, he felt enraged.

Why can't she listen to me for long enough to heed my advice about that man?

"I ... I'm sorry," Percy heard himself saying as he walked away from Lydia again. "I have to ... excuse me."

Lydia stood, stunned as she watched Percy walk away from her for the second time in under two weeks. She could feel the sting of betrayal flaming in her cheeks as she saw him disappear into the crowd once more. She couldn't believe that she had been duped into being taken off by him to have a discussion once more and was now more confused than ever. She was no longer certain that Percy had a young woman who he was courting because only a very scatterbrained man would play the same joke twice upon a vulnerable young woman such as her.

She was just about to hear why he had run away from her the first time, and then he had done the same thing again! She could feel tears stinging in her eyes, and she started to push her way through the crowd of people, trying desperately to discover Marianne so that they could go home together.

However, when she could not find Marianne, she headed towards the door, and a young man suddenly appeared in front of her. “Good evening, Miss,” the young man said. “I hope that I am not disturbing you, but I noticed you fleeing with great haste from the room, and I was wondering if there was anything I could do to assist you?”

Lydia finally looked up at the man and was stunned by how handsome he was. He had short blond hair, brown eyes, and a warm, encouraging smile. He looked like the kind of man who would be a delight to come home to, and would never complain about anything. Lydia instantly felt at ease around him, even though she had no idea who he was.

“I ... no, thank you,” Lydia said sheepishly, trying to dry her eyes covertly. When she looked up at him again, he looked a little disappointed, and so she said, “But I very much appreciate your offer. I am Miss Lydia Seymour, and you are ...?”

“Edmund Russell,” he said, bowing before her. “I am the Duke of Penderley. I’m a distant relative of Lewis’, and I am in town for this celebration as well as to do some business. It is a *pleasure* to make your acquaintance.”

Lydia curtsied to the man, and when she rose, he took her hand and kissed it. She felt her cheeks flush with colour but forced herself to stay in the situation and not flee because of her nerves.

She and Edmund began talking. Their conversation was easy and largely revolved around their mutual hatred of dancing. Lydia enjoyed speaking with Edmund, as it was rather clear that he had his eye on her for some reason. However, as they talked more, Lydia tried to make herself feel excited and thrilled that this handsome man was interested in her, and yet ... she just couldn’t. Something was missing

from his personality that made his presence enjoyable, but not thrilling.

“Can you believe that?” he said at one point, recounting an adventure he’d had with his horse. “We got all the way out to the fields, and then when we reached the spot where I’d found the first piece of the clock, it began pouring! We had to charge home; otherwise, I fear I would have caught my death, and then when I came back the next day, I found absolutely nothing!”

Lydia gave Edmund the laugh that he was looking for, but the truth was she was no longer listening to him. She had gradually lost interest in him throughout the conversation but had tried to convince herself that it was just because she’d just had such a disappointing run-in with Percy. She was sure that if she and Edmund were to speak again, her feelings might be very different.

“I am sorry that we must part,” Edmund said when he was going to leave, “but I came to town with a good friend of mine, and he never likes to stay long at these events.” Edmund gestured in the direction of a slightly older man who was waiting impatiently by the front door. Lydia waved politely at him but received no wave back.

“That isn’t a problem,” Lydia said politely, and it was the truth. While she had enjoyed her time with Edmund, she was getting a little bit tired of his company and was desperate to go off and find Marianne. “Thank you for the conversation, and I am sure that we will run into each other again sometime.”

Edmund suddenly became very serious. “I do very much hope so,” he said, taking her hand. Lydia looked him in the eyes, but she got an uneasy feeling in her stomach. She did her best to ignore it, chalking it up to nerves, but it was rather unsettling. “Perhaps I might call upon you sometime this week?”

Lydia froze. She did not want to encourage him too much, but she also wanted to keep her options open.

“How about,” she suggested, “we partake in some of that dancing we both so despise when the next ball comes around? We can make silly comments about the other dancers while we do so!”

She hoped that this would be a pleasurable enough suggestion, for she did not feel like having Edmund come to her home.

That would give Mabel and her parents far too strong an idea about this man, and although she was not going to cast him aside just yet, she was not currently very excited about his presence. Frustratingly, the only man who seemed to be able to do that consistently was Percy.

Thankfully, Edmund seemed quite contented. “I would enjoy that very much,” he responded, kissing Lydia’s hand. With that, the two of them parted, and Lydia watched as he walked out of the ballroom and disappeared.

Chapter 7

The moment that Lydia escaped from Edmund, she raced through the crowd to try and find Marianne. She figured that she would be talking with one handsome man or another, but not spying her anywhere inside, thought that perhaps she'd gone for a walk outside. She walked past all of the delighted looking men and women dressed in their finest to make it to the French doors that led out to the garden.

But when she arrived outside, the only person that she saw in the garden was Percy. He was sitting on the edge of a fountain, looking very forlorn and generally miserable.

Lydia didn't want to give him the time of day after what he had done for the second time at this party, and yet there was something inexplicable that drew her to him. She knew that he couldn't be so rude as to abandon their conversation without reason twice, and she was determined to discover the answer.

And so, Lydia quietly approached Percy.

She thought that he had heard her coming, and so she didn't make herself known until she was practically beside him, at which point she said, "Why are you out here looking miserable, Your Grace?"

Or rather, that's what she would have said if Percy hadn't yelped at the sound of her voice and went pitching forwards into the fountain. Lydia gasped as he hit the water.

“Percy!” she cried, leaning into the fountain to help him out. It was a very shallow basin of water, thankfully, but he had gone face-first, and so when he got himself righted, he was rather drenched.

He looked at Lydia for the first time and growled, “Why did you scare me like that?”

Lydia was taken aback. “I did not mean to do that,” she rebutted. “I thought that you had heard me coming and so I started speaking to you. I do not deserve to be spoken to like that.”

Lydia let go of Percy’s jacket that she had been holding to assist him out of the water and started walking away from him.

Maybe he is just that rude!

But then, she heard some very watery footsteps following behind her, and Percy cried from behind her, “Wait! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to speak to you like that; I had water in my eyes and thought you were my sister!”

Lydia froze.

His sister?

She turned around and looked at Percy, soaking wet and looking even

more miserable than before. "Your sister?" she asked in disbelief. "We don't even have the same hair colour, how could you ..."

"I ... I don't know," Percy interrupted her. "It was a combination of the shock of hearing someone out here and the blurriness of the water in my eyes, and I'm sorry. You are certainly not my sister and thus did not deserve to be spoken to like that."

Lydia relaxed a little, but when she did, the hilarity of the situation started to creep in. She looked at Percy in front of her with his sopping wet clothes, thought about the way he had fallen into the fountain, and she couldn't help herself. She started laughing.

At first, Percy just stared at her blankly, but then, without having to ask her what was so funny, he started chuckling too. Before they knew it, they were both doubled over guffawing, and only after a few minutes were they able to catch their breaths.

"I believe that it is finally my turn to apologize," Lydia commented. "I am sorry for laughing at you, and for accidentally scaring you. I sincerely thought you had heard me coming."

Percy gave her a dreamy smile that made Lydia's heart skip a beat. "I'm afraid I must refuse both of those apologies because you have nothing to say sorry for. You were not laughing at me, you were laughing with me, and you did not accidentally scare me. It is I who should have been paying better attention to my surroundings, but I was not as I was deep in thought."

"What were you thinking about?" Lydia asked. The couple began walking back towards the fountain, where they could be further away from the party. Lydia hoped that she wouldn't be scolded too severely

by Mabel for disappearing like this, but she thought that it was worth it to be talking with Percy.

They sat on the bench near the fountain, and Lydia was glad that it was a warmer night so that Percy wouldn't be absolutely freezing in his soaking wet clothes. He did remove his jacket and place it on the bench beside him, and when it hit the wood, it made a resounding *squelch*.

"It has to do with what I was beginning to explain to you before I was called away again," Percy expressed. "And for having to be interrupted once again, as well as being rather rude to you once more, I am very sorry." Percy leaned forwards with his hands curled around the edge of the bench and looked down at his soggy shoes. "I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me once again, even though I may not deserve it."

Lydia wanted to reach out and rub Percy's back, but she knew how improper that was and so she stopped herself.

"I forgive you, Your Grace," she said quietly. "And this time, I forgive you with all my heart. I know that there is something more going on that you have not informed me of yet, for I can see it in your face. I understand that you are not that rude, and would not abandon a conversation in such a manner ordinarily."

Percy turned his head to the side to look at Lydia, and the corner of his mouth turned upwards ever so slightly.

"I very much appreciate you knowing all of that about me without me having to say anything, and you are quite right," he confirmed for her. "I had to abandon you so abruptly both times because ... my selfish

younger sister won't heed my advice regarding an older gentleman."

Lydia looked away from Percy and processed what he had just told her. She was saddened to hear that he had to deal with anyone being recalcitrant in his life, but even more so when it was his sister.

"I'm very sorry to hear that," she empathized. "What man is it who is causing the problems with her?"

Percy looked hesitant to inform her, and so she continued, saying, "You can rest assured that this information will never go to anyone else and I ..."

"Oh yes, I know that thank you, Miss Seymour," he said kindly. He took one of his hands off of the edge of the bench and moved it closer to her. She resisted the urge to take it and squeeze it. "The look on my face was because I don't believe you've been introduced to him. His name is Arthur Middleton, and he is a visiting duke who I dislike immensely. He has a terrible reputation for being frivolous with women, especially younger ones, and I won't have my sister's reputation ruined by that scum. I have told her this very plainly several times, and yet she will not listen to me."

Lydia thought of the people she had met that night, but none had been named Arthur. She was so curious to know who this man was, and so she plainly asked Percy, "What does Arthur look like?"

"He's older, probably around forty. He has dark, greying hair with a well-kept beard. He's a good few inches shorter than I am, and he always wears a green jacket," Percy described.

Lydia recalled once more the people she had seen that evening, and then she finally landed on the man who had been with Edmund, who had wanted to leave early. He had been wearing a dark green coat and had the hair that Percy had described.

“Does he typically have a sour look upon his face?” she asked, and Percy nodded. “Then I know exactly who you are talking about, but you are correct. I have not had the chance to meet him. He came to the party this evening with a distant relative of Mr Crawford’s.”

“That is right,” Percy commented. “He’s come to quite a few of the functions that have been happening in and around town, and at each one, he seems to somehow find my sister and speak with her, even though I’ve tried to keep her away from him. And Georgiana has already ... been rebellious several times in the past, and so I am trying my hardest to help her find her place in the world without destroying her reputation. I’m sorry for telling you all of this, and for how rude I was to you, but I hope that it makes sense now.”

Lydia looked at Percy seriously and then smiled. “Your Grace, I should hope that you will stop apologizing to me soon, for I am beginning to tire of it. You are very gracious to ensure that my feelings have been mended. However, if you say you’re sorry one more time, I might have to bring some of my father’s instruments with me the next time we meet and torment you with them,” she teased.

That broke the tension between the two of them, and Percy laughed. “I suppose I had better behave then,” Percy responded with playfulness in his voice. “I wouldn’t want you to use those instruments on me and make me ...”

At that point, the two realized the underlying implications of what they were saying and just stared at each other for a moment. Lydia

felt a twinge of something inside her, and desperately wanted to keep talking like this, but absolutely could not imagine anything more improper. Finally, she looked away from Percy, and that seemed to stop whatever was happening between them. She did, however, promise herself that she would think about this more later tonight when she was alone in bed.

Suddenly, there was a tapping on the glass door leading back into the ball, and when both of them looked up, Lydia saw Mabel standing there, looking rather unimpressed. She waved to her to tell her that she would be there momentarily and then turned to Percy.

“I suppose that I have to go now,” she said apologetically, “but thank you ever so much for the explanation and the company. I ... very much enjoyed our short time together.”

Lydia rose from the bench, as did Percy. He was looking at her as though he did not know the right thing to say, but he finally managed to get something out.

“Will you be at the Lucas’ ball?” he asked. Lydia nodded, and Percy continued, “Would you set aside a dance for me then?”

Lydia’s heart fluttered, and her stomach did a somersault. She nodded emphatically and said, “That ... that would be delightful.”

And then, without warning, Percy took her hand, lifted it to his lips, and gave it a very delicate, quick kiss while looking her in the eyes. Lydia’s heart very nearly stopped, but it did not have time to, as Percy then disappeared deeper into the garden so quickly. She stood there stunned for a few seconds, looking off in the direction that Percy had disappeared in, and then finally remembered herself. She shook her

head to try and clear the love-struck fog that had descended on it, and then went back inside the house. She knew that she would not be able to focus on anything much for the rest of the evening.

Chapter 8

Later that night, Percy lay in his bed. He couldn't stop his mind from racing for long enough to actually get to sleep, and so he let his thoughts wander.

He was at Lydia's house, and she was giving him a tour. There was no one else at home, and when she got to the room where her father kept all of his medical instruments that they had mentioned that night, she closed the door behind them.

"Why did you close the door?" Percy asked playfully.

Lydia gave him a naughty smile and said, "I'm going to examine you, and so I wanted to allow us a little bit of privacy."

Percy knew that this kind of fantasy was not an ordinary one, and if anyone were to find out about it, he would be mocked for the rest of his days. But as he stroked himself beneath the covers, he did not care what his mind focused on, as long as it was doing something for him.

Back in his fantasy, Lydia began undressing him. She began slowly, saying things like, "I'm just going to take this off so that I can have a better look at you." But by the time she'd got his jacket, vest, and shirt off, Percy was already hard. When she looked down at his throbbing member, her eyes widened, and she said, "Well. That's certainly something that I'm going to have to look at more carefully."

And then, Lydia got down onto her knees so that her mouth was positioned right in front of his cock. “Oh are you?” Percy replied playfully. “What will you be looking for exactly?”

Lydia began taking down his pants, and when she finally took his desire in her hands, he could hardly contain himself. Her hands felt so silky stroking his cock, and he frankly didn’t care what she did from here, as long as she kept going.

“Oh, nothing in particular,” Lydia responded, looking up at him with big, innocent eyes. “All I want to do is try you on for size in my mouth so that I can ensure that you’ll slide comfortably between the lips of my tight wetness.”

“Oh my God,” Percy whispered audibly, and Lydia began licking him delicately with her tongue. When she’d teased him enough like that, she took him all the way inside her in one smooth motion, and Percy felt his legs buckle, but thankfully he was able to remain standing up.

“Yes, God, yes, please,” Percy groaned, feeling the back of Lydia’s throat meet with his tip. She felt so warm, and the feeling of her tongue pressed up against the base of his shaft made him want to pass out. When she started adding a sucking motion as she teased him in and out of her, he could feel himself getting quickly closer to the edge.

Lydia looked up at him with his member between her lips, and he put his hands on either side of her head. He gently thrust himself inside of her, and when he couldn’t hold it in any longer, he withdrew from her mouth. He had got so close that he wasn’t sure he could stop himself from finishing, but thankfully he had.

“Would you like to perform a bit of an examination on me?” Lydia asked naughtily. Percy said nothing, instead scooping her up and placing her on the edge of the exam table. Lydia squealed delightedly, but when he got her into position, Percy put a finger to her lips.

“Shhh, shhh,” he quieted her, “we wouldn’t want anyone to hear us, now would we? Otherwise, I might have to make up some terrible excuse and get us both in deep, deep trouble.”

Lydia placed her whole hand over Percy’s finger and giggled beneath it. When she had her mouth free once more, she said, “How about you just come deep, deep inside of me instead?”

Percy felt his throbbing erection somehow get harder. “You dirty, dirty, girl,” he growled into her ear. “You’ll get exactly what you want, but first, I have to examine between your legs with my tongue. Just need to, you know, ensure that your wetness is enough for our purposes.”

Lydia let out another quiet squeal of delight, and Percy ran his hand up her skirt. “Do you want that, Lydia?” he asked her seductively. When his hand was poised right above the spot where she so desperately wanted to be touched, the playfulness disappeared from her face and was quickly replaced with desperation.

“Yes,” Lydia whimpered, “yes, please, Percy.”

But Percy wasn’t done teasing her yet. He agonizingly slowly lifted her skirts to reveal her legs but kept his hand right where it had been before. “I don’t know,” Percy teased. “You don’t sound as sure as you should.”

Lydia desperately shook her head from side to side, "No, no, I'm sure," she pleaded. "I want to feel you buried deep between my legs, whether that starts with your fingers, your mouth, or your ... your ..."

As Percy watched, Lydia's face flushed pink.

Percy smiled devilishly. "My what?" he asked innocently. "If you can't say the word, then I won't be able to give it to you."

Lydia looked very determined all of a sudden and replied, "Your penis. Your hard, throbbing penis."

Percy made an animalistic noise and then slipped his hand between her legs. When she felt him, she let out a very satisfied, "Mmmmmm," and then Percy set to work.

First, he kissed her deeply, playing with her tongue to show her exactly what he was about to do to her clitoris. Then, he began encircling her clitoris with his finger, rubbing it very gently. When he felt Lydia stiffen up and embrace him so that he was pressed against her, he took his other hand and swiftly slipped it inside her. She cried out quietly when he did, but he didn't chastise her for making that noise, as he was finished teasing her about that.

Lydia felt so warm and soft against his fingers, and the way her wetness was allowing him to slip smoothly in and out of her made him want to be inside of her as quickly as he could be. But he knew that it was important to ensure that a woman finished first, and so he continued playing with her and teasing with his fingers inside her.

When she was whimpering uncontrollably, and her legs had started to

shake, Percy moved his head down between her legs and started licking her. Her skirts were now over his head, and it was unbelievably warm beneath them, but he didn't care. She smelled irresistible, and he so desperately wanted to hear what she sounded like when she shuddered with pleasure.

He could tell that she was getting close because her walls were beginning to clamp down around his finger. He could hear her moaning quietly and desperately, and so he knew any second she would surely go over the edge. And then, in a surprising turn of events, Lydia came a lot faster than he thought she would.

He heard her whimper one final time and then felt her legs clamp around his head. There was a deluge of liquid that exploded from within her, but Percy managed to keep his fingers inside her and continue stroking to ensure she felt the full pleasure of her orgasm. When she was finally finished, she collapsed against the examination table, and Percy slowly drew his head out from beneath her skirts.

When he looked down at her splayed out on the table, he couldn't help smiling. "Was that ... enough?" he asked wickedly.

Lydia was still catching her breath, but she managed to smile at him as well. "N ... no," she finally answered. "That was incredible but ... you didn't grant my wish of ..."

But before Lydia could finish her sentence, Percy pushed open her legs, drew her skirts up again, and plunged inside of her. She looked up at him in surprise and cried out with pleasure, and Percy slowly started thrusting inside her.

"Is that what you wanted?" he growled as he felt her tight warmth

enveloping his member.

“Yes ... oh God, yes!” Lydia scream-whispered. Percy bent forward and lifted Lydia under her arms so that he was still inside of her, but she was sitting up. Their faces were now practically pressed against each other, and evidently that shift in position was now doing something more for Lydia. “Oh ... Oh, Percy ...” she moaned in his ear, “I ... I don’t think I can last as long as you might need me to.”

Percy let out a deep, gravelly laugh. “Oh, don’t wait for me,” he instructed her. “You explode whenever you need to, and I’ll follow quickly.”

With that, Percy began thrusting harder and deeper inside her, and it was too much for Lydia to handle. She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulled him into her as deep as she could, and as she gripped him as tightly as she could and groaned with delight, he felt her wetness cascade over his cock.

That, of course, sent him right over the edge. Percy grabbed Lydia’s head and said, “Will you ... watch me while I ...” but he didn’t even have to finish his sentence because Lydia nodded emphatically, and then the wave of the orgasm washed over him. As he looked deeply into Lydia’s eyes, his ejaculation exploded out of him, and he felt the ultimate pleasure coursing through his veins. It was the best orgasm he had ever experienced, and when Percy opened his eyes in real life, he realized it hadn’t all been a dream.

He lay in bed panting with his sheets thrown off of him and his cock still hard after his orgasm. He may have been covered in his own semen, but he couldn’t have been happier. It was the best climax he’d ever had, and he so desperately hoped that maybe one day, he would be able to make his fantasy come true with Lydia.

Chapter 9

The next morning, Percy was pacing back and forth in front of Lewis in his study. “But why on earth is he in town then?” Percy wondered aloud. “It must be solely to seduce my sister, as he has no other business with anyone else nearby. That *mongrel*.”

“Perhaps he just likes this town better,” Lewis said idly. He was flipping through the pages of one of Percy’s finest books, and Percy had the feeling he wasn’t entirely listening to him. Lewis was a great friend when he wanted to be, but sometimes he overlooked the seriousness of a situation.

Percy snatched the book out of Lewis’ hands, and his friend became very annoyed. “What was that for?” he asked, offended.

“I’m trying to figure out a way to stop my sister from having her reputation ruined, and you’re sitting there reading, not listening to me. Why do you think I did that?” Percy asked him rhetorically.

“*Because*,” Lewis said, taking the book back, “if you haven’t noticed, this is a book on the history of the Middleton family. I was trying to see if he had any relations here in town that might be able to give us some insight into his character.”

“Oh,” Percy said ashamedly. “Sorry. Shouldn’t have thought so ill of you.”

“Thanks,” Lewis said simply, re-opening the book. “Next time, just ask me instead of being a prick about it.”

Both gentlemen started laughing, and Percy was relieved that their disruption was over with. “Did you mention something about being friends with that relative of yours, Edmund something?” Percy enquired.

Lewis stopped looking at the book and raised an eyebrow at Percy. “Oh. Yes, that is right. I suppose that he might be staying in town as long as Edmund is. That could be the reason why he’s here, and perhaps nothing is going on between Arthur and your sister.”

Percy rolled his eyes. “Arthur Middleton has been personally responsible for ruining the reputation of Miss Cecily Grantham, Lady Catherine Everlure, and Miss Francesca Gladstone. If he was able to corrupt those three women, don’t you think it would be plausible for him to do the same to Georgiana?”

A strange look came across Lewis’ face. “I have a feeling that Georgiana is far too clever for that, Percival. She might just be toying with Arthur’s emotions to get back at him for what he did to those three women.”

Percy made a sound of disbelief. “While I do know that Georgiana is brilliant, I doubt that she would have enough forethought to carry out a plan such as that one.”

Lewis put his hands up in defeat. “Fine, fine,” he replied, “we’ll keep an extra eye on her at the next party, and we’ll drop the subject for now. It does not do to dwell on concerns and forget to live, Percy.”

Percy sighed and took a seat at his desk. "I suppose you're right," he admitted. "What is that Edmund character's last name again?"

"Russell," Lewis responded. "But I'm surprised that you didn't take more note of him at my party. He and Miss Seymour spent a great deal of the evening talking and laughing with each other."

Percy froze. "He what?" he asked in disbelief.

"They seemed to be having quite a good time of it," Lewis continued, blissfully unaware of the misery that he was causing Percy. "I wondered why she was enjoying his company so much, though. That man is about as exciting as a dull knife."

Percy's hopes were buoyed somewhat. "Oh, really?" he tried to ask nonchalantly.

"Definitely," Lewis reported. "I remember being stuck in a conversation with him once and wondering how one man could pick so many boring topics in the course of one conversation. He talked about the process of making clotted cream for *ten minutes*."

Percy chuckled. While he was not excited to hear that Lydia had been seen talking with another man for most of the night, he chalked it up to being polite. He knew that she would never stand for having to put up with a boring man, so for the time being, he felt reassured.

“He is quite nice, though,” Lewis countered. “If he and Miss Seymour were to end up together, it would be an excellent match for both of them. She would finally be rich, and he would finally be interesting.”

Of course. Right when I was beginning to feel all right about the situation, he has to bring that in.

Percy decided that the best course of action for the time being was to change the subject. The two young men began discussing the latest hunt that they’d been a part of and what a miserable failure it had been. They made plans to go on another one the next week.

On the other side of town, Lydia was visiting Marianne at her home and catching her up about the night’s events. Lydia and Mabel had gone home in one carriage while Marianne and Gertrude had gone in another, so they had not been able to gossip after the party. And Lydia had yet to tell her about her meeting with Percy outside.

When she finally finished recounting the story – including the disastrous fall into the fountain that Percy had – to Marianne, she could hardly believe her ears. “Lydia!” she cried. “You were alone in a garden with a man who you swore you hated after your last two encounters with him ... but now you seem to have changed your opinion of him entirely!”

Lydia blushed and looked down at her fingers. There was a spot of dirt on one of them, and she pretended to be preoccupied with cleaning it off, but she knew that she could only hide from Marianne for so long. “My opinion of him has not entirely changed, Marianne,” Lydia said calmly. “I was confounded by his behaviour those two times and had greatly considered writing him off entirely. But now that I know why he had to dash, it makes complete sense, and I no longer see the point of spurning him!”

“And you’re still set on keeping the reason why he brushed you off a secret?” Marianne prompted her.

Lydia chuckled. “Very much so,” she responded. “But I’m surprised that you are focusing on that detail so heavily when you have not asked me one single thing about Edmund Russell.”

Marianne raised an eyebrow at her and crossed her arms in front of her chest. She was sitting on the edge of her bed and glowering at Lydia, who was seated comfortably on Marianne’s favourite chair. Marianne’s family was slightly better off than Lydia’s, but the Haggerstons were by no means rich. Marianne’s bedroom was small but well-appointed, and if Lydia had a room like this one at her home, she would have been over the moon.

“Who is Edmund Russell, and why have you not mentioned him before now?” Marianne grilled her.

“Well ...” Lydia said sheepishly. “He just ... slipped my mind!”

Marianne took her slipper off and swatted Lydia on the knee, causing both girls to laugh. Lydia then filled Marianne in on what had gone on with Edmund at the party, and now Marianne appeared even more confused.

“Wait, wait, wait,” Marianne stopped her. “Now, you’re telling me that not only are your feelings for Percy re-ignited but now you also have another handsome duke vying for your affections?!”

“Now, now,” Lydia scolded her, “there is no need to get ahead of ourselves. I have no confirmation that Edmund has any interest in courting me, and I would say the same thing about Percy. While these are both exciting developments, we must remember ...”

“Oh, would you stop being so *practical* for a moment!” Marianne shouted at her in mock frustration. “Both of these gentlemen have been exceedingly kind to you and have also showered you with a great deal of attention! Could we not set aside your usual apprehension for a moment and just fully enjoy the possibility that these two men might be fighting for your love? I mean, can you imagine?”

Lydia rose from her chair and walked over to Marianne’s window. It was quite small but had a stunning view out of it. From Marianne’s house, Lydia could see across the rolling fields that surrounded it and noticed all of the wildflowers that had taken root haphazardly. She was so distracted by the beauty of the scene that she very nearly forgot to respond to Marianne.

“But Marianne dear,” Lydia said softly, “if I do allow myself the opportunity to fantasize about both of these men wanting my love, then I would never be able to choose between them. How could I?”

Lydia turned around and looked dismayed at Marianne, who quickly appeared right in front of her to comfort her. “Lydia,” she said softly, “you’re doing it again. Don’t be so worried! If that does happen, which I have an inclination that it might, you must enjoy the process of divining which man is to be your soul mate! If you fret too much about it, you won’t be able to look back on this time with any happiness whatsoever, and it might lead to you making the wrong choice. Set your mind at ease and just imagine ... who would you really prefer to end up with, in your heart of hearts?”

Lydia tried to protest again, but Marianne wouldn't hear of it. And so, Lydia sighed and was silent for a few minutes. She went and sat on the edge of the bed where Marianne had been sitting and thought about each man. She tried to focus on Edmund's handsome face and the pleasant conversation they'd had, but Percy's kind eyes and warm spirit kept distracting her. She knew exactly who she really wanted, but was worried about telling Marianne the truth.

"I suppose ..." she began, summoning her courage. "If I'm being true to my heart ... I think that Percy is rather amazing."

Marianne clapped delightedly and hugged Lydia tightly. "Percy it is then! Now let us have fun and *enjoy* seeing where your relationship together will go!"

Chapter 10

Two more weeks went by before Lydia and Percy were to see each other again. This time, they were both attending a ball at Charles Lucas' estate, and as soon as they arrived, Lydia was practically vibrating with nerves. She remembered the dance that she had promised Percy and hoped that an opportunity would arise for that promise to come true.

However, she also had a pretty good feeling that Edmund would also be in attendance that night and was unsure how to feel about him. She knew that she had told Marianne that she had far more interest in Percy, but if there were also the option of Edmund, that wouldn't be a bad thing, now would it?

But as soon as they arrived at the dance, Edmund appeared in front of Lydia. "Miss Seymour," he greeted her happily, "what a delight it is to find you here this evening. Might I whisk you away to partake in some of the abhorrent dancing?"

Lydia was stunned by Edmund's sudden appearance, as well as his proposal to dance with her. She had not been expecting that, considering the fact that they had spent so much time talking about how they both hated dancing the last time they had been together.

Lydia looked frantically to Marianne, who knew exactly what was going on. Marianne gave her a look that said, *Do you want me to get you out of this situation?* But because Lydia was so conflicted about her feelings for Edmund, she shook her head and decided to accept him. She turned back to him and said quietly, "That would be lovely, thank you, Your Grace."

Edmund couldn't have looked happier. He offered his hand to Lydia, and the pair walked across the hall together. Right as they were about to join the dance, Lydia could feel a pair of eyes upon her, and when she looked up to see who it was, she saw Percy for the first time that evening.

He was looking devilishly handsome by firelight. He wore a navy suit jacket with a maroon cravat, and he had done something different with his hair, but Lydia couldn't quite tell what it was. And when she saw the look upon his face, Lydia's heart positively broke. He looked utterly disappointed.

While this discovery upset Lydia, she did have to remind herself that she and Percy were not officially courting, and there was a chance they never might. He was a duke, and she was not of the same class, and so perhaps he did not wish to get involved in any scandal when it came to being with her.

She knew Edmund was a duke as well, but the fact that he was publicly being seen with her and dancing with her made her feel more reassured that he might ask to court her any time now.

And then, Lydia and Edmund were whisked into the dance. The music moved so quickly that Lydia had a hard time keeping up, but Edmund didn't seem to mind. In fact, quite the opposite. He seemed to take great delight in watching her make errors while she was dancing.

He was having similar difficulties, and so perhaps her foolishness when it came to dancing made him feel more at ease around her. Lydia looked to the other dancers at one point to see if anyone else was struggling, and to her embarrassment, no one was. However, she

didn't much mind, as she and Edmund were having such a wonderful time.

When the dance was over, she and Edmund escaped the dance and scurried over to a corner where Mabel could clearly see them. Lydia knew that she had deeply offended her chaperone the other night by disappearing with Percy, and so she did not mean to repeat her offence a second time.

"I am very glad that we were finally able to get out of there!" Edmund cried, still laughing. "Frankly, I was very nervous to ask you to dance, as I know we both hate it, but I thought it might be a comedic way to begin our evening together."

Lydia quickly took note of the way he had ended his comment. "Begin our evening together?" she repeated with a mixture of disbelief and delight.

Edmund turned away, and Lydia could see the colour flooding his cheeks. "Sorry, I didn't mean to say that, I just meant ..."

"No, no," Lydia reassured him, "it's quite all right. I enjoyed that suggestion."

And then, Edmund gave her a smile that made her heart melt. She was no longer certain of what she had informed Marianne regarding her choice between the two men and so decided not to swear off Edmund just yet. She began by asking him to tell her more about himself, and when he launched into introducing her to all of the animals he kept at his estate, she was delighted.

It seemed that Edmund was quite the animal enthusiast. He collected rare and exotic animals but gave them all the very best of care. He explained all of the strange and wonderful creatures that he had currently in his collection, and Lydia couldn't help being entranced by them.

He then told her about his family, who seemed quite ordinary but very lovely, and his few friends outside of his estate. He did not mention Arthur in his list of friends, Lydia noted, and so she kept that in the back of her mind. She wondered what Edmund's opinion of him was, especially as he had come to town with him.

"That is all I shall tell you for now," Edmund said, suddenly shy, "for I feel that I have been blabbering on for far too long. I would very much like to know more about you if you would allow me such joy?"

Lydia nodded and smiled delightedly at Edmund. She began telling him about her family and friends, as well as some of her interesting hobbies. She noticed that as she spoke, he did not take his eyes off of her once, and she realized that no one had listened to her so intently in quite some time. She relished in the delightful feeling that came along with it.

However, as she spoke with Edmund more, she realized that her feelings towards him were more of the friendly variety. She couldn't quite put her finger on why exactly she thought this, but then her mind drifted back to Percy. She wondered if she would feel differently about Edmund if she hadn't already been introduced to Percy. The types of passionate feelings that she harboured for Percy were so new to her that she felt drawn to them instantly. She felt very badly that the way she felt about Percy was clouding her view of Edmund.

"Miss Seymour," Edmund said sadly when a lull in their conversation

occurred, "I am very sorry to have to do this to you, but I am afraid that I must depart from you. I forgot that I promised my valet that I would care for my injured parrot later this evening to give him the night off. I would love nothing more than to continue speaking with you, but I'm afraid I must take my leave of you."

"That is absolutely no problem, Your Grace," Lydia said graciously, secretly happy that she now had a chance to go and speak with Percy. "I understand that duty calls, and I do hope that your parrot recovers as quickly as possible!"

Edmund thanked her for being so understanding, and then bid her farewell and left the great hall. Lydia was left standing along for a grand total of about thirty seconds before she felt someone tap her on the shoulder. When she turned around, Percy was standing there, and Lydia almost fainted with excitement.

"Miss Seymour," he greeted her rather gruffly. Lydia was immediately worried that he might be jealous of Edmund and what he had just witnessed between him and Lydia. However, his unhappiness quickly faded, and he continued rather pleasantly, "Might you ask your chaperone to accompany us to the next room? I was hoping that I might have a word with you somewhere that I might actually be able to hear you."

Lydia smiled gleefully, nodded, and then ran to get Mabel to tell her where she was going. Mabel followed behind her, and Lydia and Percy went off into the next room to speak somewhere quieter.

The room next door happened to be the sitting room, and while there were still a few guests milling about, there were far less than in the great hall. Mabel took a spot in the corner and picked up a book, a signal to Lydia that she trusted her, but would still passively be watching.

“What did you wish to speak with me about, Your Grace?” Lydia asked.

Percy smirked. “You don’t need to call me that anymore,” he said in a deep, sexy voice. “You have my permission to refer to me as Percy.”

Lydia’s heart was so happy that it very nearly stopped beating entirely. “Percy. In that case, I would enjoy it if you referred to me as Lydia.”

A warm, happy smile spread across Percy’s lips. “I’m very happy that we cleared that up. Now, I wished to speak to you about ...”

But Percy stopped mid-sentence and looked just behind Lydia, horrified. This time, Lydia was smart and immediately turned around to see who it was. She saw an older, but quite an attractive man talking with a young, vibrant-looking woman, and she assumed that this must have been Georgiana and Arthur.

She turned right back around to Percy and said, “Go to her, Percy. Do not worry about our conversation.” She felt her heart sinking as she knew she was about to lose him once again to the pursuit of his rebellious sister.

Chapter 11

But in a surprising turn of events, Percy flicked his eyes towards her and curtly nodded, but then said, “Wait right here.” He rose from his chair, and Lydia watched him interrupt the conversation between Arthur and Georgiana. To her surprise, Georgiana did not seem that disappointed and came away from their interaction with ease. She followed her brother back to the area where he had been sitting with Lydia, and Georgiana came to sit beside Percy.

“Lydia Seymour,” Percy said when he sat back down, “allow me to introduce to you my younger sister, Georgiana.”

Lydia gave Georgiana a welcoming smile and responded, “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve heard so much about you!”

Georgiana, however, did not seem as delighted to be meeting Lydia. “Only bad things, I assume, if my brother has been telling you about me,” Georgiana grumbled, not looking up at Lydia at all.

“Why on earth would you think that?” Lydia asked kindly. “He’s been telling me what a vivacious, interesting person you are.”

Georgiana finally glanced up at Lydia, to check and see if she was being serious, which she was. Then, she looked to her brother. “So, you rave about me to everyone else, but you still treat me like a child?” Georgiana asked petulantly. “If you really thought I was all of those things, then why can’t you trust me to make my own decisions?”

Percy looked mirthfully at Lydia and then turned his attention back to his sister. "Because," he began, leaning in towards her more, "sometimes your vivacity and natural inclination towards seeking out all of life's most interesting experiences leaves me to clean up the mess you leave in your wake. And while I want you to experience all of the best things that life has to offer, I need you to take responsibility for your actions and understand the impact that they have on others."

Both young women were silent for a few moments after that miniature speech from Percy. Lydia couldn't be sure of how Georgiana felt, but Lydia knew that she was thoroughly impressed by the way in which Percy had maturely and seriously spoken to his sister. It was the perfect combination of understanding and chastising, and Lydia couldn't have been more impressed by him.

When she looked at Georgiana out of the corner of her eye finally, she saw that the speech seemed to have had the same effect on her. Georgiana no longer looked like a fussy child; she now looked impressed by him.

"All right, brother, I suppose that I will allow you to speak to me in that way this time, but don't think you'll be so lucky the next time. By the way, I do believe that the Countess of Duvernay has spied you, and she is looking to speak with you. Otherwise, she appears to be trying to signal you with some sort of strange code," Georgiana commented.

Both Percy and Lydia looked up at the same time and saw that the countess was indeed looking at him in a strange manner and flitting her hands this way and that. Percy looked back at Lydia, and she immediately knew that he was not excited about speaking with the countess. However, as it was his duty, he stood up, looked apologetically at Lydia and his sister, and said, "I shall return as soon

as I can.”

Lydia watched him walk away very slowly, almost as though his desire to stay and speak with her and his sister was physically pulling him back. But then when he met up with the countess, his sense of social duty seemed to return, and he suddenly seemed completely unbothered to be speaking with the society lady.

“I don't envy his duty, and I do feel rather badly for him, but I must admit that I am rather happy to have the chance to speak with you alone,” Georgiana surprisingly commented to Lydia.

“You are?” Georgiana asked. “Why ever is that?”

Georgiana raised an eyebrow at her. “You act as if I haven't taken notice of the attention that my brother has been paying you,” she said. “I have not seen Percy take anything more than a polite interest in a woman ... ever. And now he's suddenly seeking you out at every social gathering, and sneaking off to speak with you privately whenever he can get the chance.”

Lydia scoffed, but then remembered who it was she was talking to and stopped. “I can certainly understand why you would be inclined to believe such things about Percy and me,” Lydia replied, “but I can assure you that Percy and I are nothing more than friends. We've only really known each other for about a month, and so ...”

“Only *really* known each other?” Georgiana interrupted. Lydia's heart skipped a beat when she realized the error that she'd made. “What do you mean *really*?”

“Oh, I was ... I merely meant ... Uhm ...” Lydia heard herself stuttering as she madly tried to think of a lie to feed to Georgiana. She had only just met her, and she couldn’t possibly reveal her almost life-long crush she’d had on Georgiana’s brother.

But Georgiana was looking at her with such an expression of kindness that she immediately felt at ease around her. “Miss Seymour,” she said generously, “if there is anything that you are holding back with me about your relationship with my brother, I should tell you that you have nothing to fear. Not only am I the disappointment of the family, and so I am sure I have done much worse than what you are about to reveal to me, but I also happen to be a vault of secrets. Anything that you reveal to me will not be uttered aloud ever again, and especially not to Percy.”

Lydia couldn’t help chuckling at Georgiana calling herself a disappointment. “I know for a fact that you are not a disappointment in your brother’s eyes, Miss Georgiana if you don’t mind me calling you that.” Georgiana waved her hand at Lydia, letting her know that she did not mind being called Miss Georgiana one bit. “And I very much appreciate the reassurance that you would not mention anything I told you to anyone, but I’m afraid I cannot elaborate on what I said. I would be positively mortified to reveal that to anyone.”

This, however, seemed to be exactly what Georgiana had wanted to hear. She clapped excitedly and leaned in closer to Lydia. “Miss Seymour ...”

“Please, feel free to call me Lydia,” she interrupted.

Georgiana gave her a pleased smile. “Lydia. I will have you know that I have done so many embarrassing things in my life that I have become better acquainted with the feeling than anyone else I know.

Please, please let me know that I am not alone in my embarrassment and share yours with me?"

Georgiana clasped her hands together in a begging formation and contorted her face so severely that she looked like she would absolutely die if Lydia did not tell her her embarrassing secret. And so, after some more consideration, she decided that she could trust Georgia and launched into a light re-telling of how she had felt for Percy when she was younger.

When Lydia finished, Georgiana looked somewhat disappointed. "Oh," she said quietly. "I thought you were going to tell me of some youthful dalliance that you and Percy had together, for that would have been much more exciting."

Lydia laughed, surprised. "I'm terribly sorry for disappointing you," she said jokingly. "I'm afraid that I'm a boringly well-behaved young woman."

Georgiana flicked her head in Lydia's direction, her eyes alight with mischief and her hands gripping both arms of the chair. "We could change that!" she said excitedly, and then both young women dissolved into laughter.

When they finally managed to collect themselves, Lydia looked over to see how Percy was doing. His polite societal exterior was beginning to falter, and he was looking increasingly bored by the second. Lydia desperately wanted to go over there and rescue him from his conversation, but she knew that she had no place interrupting a duke and a countess, just as she felt she had no place dreaming of a handsome duke courting her.

As if she was reading her thoughts, Georgiana suddenly piped up, “He doesn’t give two figs about class and all of that, you know.”

Lydia whipped her head around to look at Georgiana to see if she was serious, which she was. “Why did you mention that?” Lydia asked, trying to sound innocent.

“We could dance around this all night,” Georgiana said finally, “but I know that you like my brother, and I have it on quite good authority that he likes you, so I see no reason why he shouldn’t be courting you this very minute.”

Lydia just stared at Georgiana. She surveyed every minute movement on Georgiana’s face to see if there was any hint of mockery, but there was none. She wanted to ask Georgiana how she could be so certain of that and try to get anything more out of her about Percy’s feelings towards her, but she knew better than that. She did not dare give away any more of her feelings, and so she simply stayed silent.

When Georgiana had grown tired of waiting for her to reply, she filled in the silence herself. “It has been nice seeing him have someone who brings him so much happiness,” she commented. “I know that he spends most of the rest of his time worrying about me, so I’m glad he has a reprieve. I sometimes feel bad about the stress and worry that I cause him simply by having fun for myself. But this is the first time in my life that I’ve been allowed to go out and actually meet people in society. Why can’t I have a little fun if everyone else is allowed to?”

Georgiana had a good point. Lydia, however, knew exactly what to say in return. “I understand you perfectly,” she replied. “When I was first allowed to attend balls and parties, I went a little wild myself, if you can believe that. And while it was a great deal of fun, I very quickly learned how much one needs to watch oneself at these gatherings. They may seem like all fun and games, but there are so

many eyes on you all the time. And there are some men in attendance at every party who one does not want to get involved with, even though our hearts sometimes tell us the opposite.”

Lydia hoped that she was coming off as understanding without revealing too much of what Percy had revealed to her about Georgiana’s goings on. As she studied Georgiana’s face once more, she discovered that she had toed the line just perfectly.

“It is funny you should mention that,” Georgiana said casually, “for the thing I believe my brother worries the most about is my association with unsavoury men. But what Percy doesn’t know,” she said, leaning in close to Lydia and beckoning her closer with her finger, “is that I have quite a good eye when it comes to problematic men, and I know exactly how to deal with them.”

Something in Georgiana’s smile told Lydia that there was much more to what she was saying, and she was quite obviously alluding to something that was transpiring either presently or was just about to. However, right when Lydia was about to engage her more in conversation on that topic, Percy reappeared in the chair beside his sister.

“I cannot believe,” he said as he was seated again, “that neither of you looked over to me once to see if I needed rescuing from that conversation. I was counting on you to be my escape if I needed you!”

Georgiana rolled her eyes, but Lydia was offended. “I did look over to you!” she defended herself. “But you were not looking at me, and so I returned my attention to your charming sister here, as I should have been doing.”

Percy looked from Lydia to Georgiana and back again, and then dropped the topic. “What were the two of you speaking of?” he asked them.

It was Lydia and Georgiana’s turn to share a look, and then Georgiana jumped in to respond. “Bonnets,” she said hastily, “I was telling Lydia all about the new bonnet that you picked up for me at the haberdashery the other day.”

While this was a lie, it made Lydia realize something. The hat that Percy had been in to pick up the other day had not been for some woman that he was courting – it was for his sister. A little relief washed over Lydia, and she was very relieved to hear that there was not some mystery woman also vying for Percy’s attention.

“Ah yes,” Percy responded, sounding as though he didn’t believe a word of what his sister was saying. “Because you can talk about hats for all that time, and bonnets certainly elicit the gales of laughter that I heard coming from over here.”

Percy raised an eyebrow and gave the girls a hard look, but neither of them cracked. Lydia was about to respond when out of the corner of her eye, she saw Mabel leaving the room. She assumed that she was seeking out a place to relieve herself, and Lydia knew that if she wanted to talk to Percy alone and not have Mabel find them for at least a few minutes, she had to move now.

It seemed that fortune was smiling on her this evening, as one of Georgiana’s trusted friends suddenly appeared, and the two young women scurried off together, discussing some drama or another. Percy and Lydia watched her dash away, both pleasantly amused by her sudden disappearance.

But when Percy looked back at Lydia, he had a very intense expression on his face. "Would you like to ..." he started to say, but Lydia interrupted him.

"Yes," she said hastily, rising from her chair and keeping an eye on the door to see if Mabel was returning at any moment. "Whatever it is, absolutely yes, but we must move quickly."

Percy looked and saw that Mabel was gone and immediately understood what she meant. "Come with me," he said quietly and dashed in the direction of the doors at the back of the room. Lydia scampered behind him, her heart pounding with excitement.

Chapter 12

Percy and Lydia raced across the lawn, laughing madly as they did, but also trying to remain as quiet as they could. Percy's family estate was right next to the Lucas', and so he was taking her there to the building that was closest to the party. He knew that they would be alone there.

When he got Georgiana's greenhouse in his sight and saw that the moon was shining brightly through the glass panes that it was covered in, his heart soared. That had been the only worry left on his mind – that it might not be light enough in there for the two of them to sit and talk. But now that he knew he had moonlight on his side, he felt unstoppable.

When they reached the doors, he took the key from the secret spot in the bushes, unlocked it, and held the door for Lydia. When she had made it inside the greenhouse, she stopped just inside the door and looked around in amazement. Percy came here so often that he forgot how extraordinary it was to see such a collection of exotic plants all in one place, so it was nice to see someone marvelling at it so.

“This ... this is unbelievable,” Lydia whispered. “I have seen a great many gardens and conservatories in my time, but never any as sensational as this one. Your gardener is a very talented man.”

Percy laughed out loud. “This is actually all Georgiana's work. She may be a rebellious little sister, but she is an exceptionally talented gardener.”

Lydia looked back at him with her jaw hanging open. “Georgiana did all of this? My goodness. I would have thought that you had a whole team dedicated to ensuring that this was well kept. I must ask her about all of these different species the next time we speak,” she noted to herself.

“I was so happy to see that the two of you got along so well,” Percy said happily. “She has some friends, but none of them are as good an influence as I would have hoped. I would very much enjoy it if you were to spend some more time with her. I believe that you would be a wonderful role model for an impressionable young woman like my sister.”

Percy took a few steps towards Lydia, and as he did, the moonlight illuminated the right half of her face, and she had never looked more beautiful to him. He had, of course, been immediately taken with her when they first met.

Now that he had got to know her better, however, and saw what an incredible person she was inside, she became twice as gorgeous. Lydia was looking back at him with a mixture of admiration and adoration, and Percy thought that they might be about to share an intimate moment together.

But then, Lydia said, “Me? You think that I am a good role model? I don't believe anyone has ever thought of me that way ... or at least they've never told me if they have. That is one of the kindest things anyone has ever said to me.”

Lydia tilted her head up towards Percy, and at this angle, the moonlight twinkled in her eyes like stars. “I believe that you should be told daily how remarkable you are, Lydia,” he commented seriously. “I've never met anyone quite like you before and ... now that you're in

my life, I can't imagine life without you."

He heard Lydia take in an audible breath, and then she looked down at her shoes. "You don't really mean that, do you?" she asked quietly. "I'm so much below you that I don't see how someone like you could ..."

Percy couldn't hold himself back any longer. He took Lydia's chin in his hand and tilted it up towards him. When their eyes met, he said softly, "May I?" He didn't even have to say what he was going to do because Lydia just knew. She nodded slowly, and then Percy leaned in and gently pressed his lips against hers.

Her mouth was so warm and inviting that Percy knew he'd made the right decision instantly. He placed a hand on the back of her head to draw her into him more. When he did, Lydia placed her hand against his chest and lightly held on to his vest.

As they began kissing more passionately, Percy took his hand off her chin and wrapped it around her back, bringing them into a sensual embrace. He had to keep his feelings of arousal tamped down, as he didn't wish to frighten her off or make her think that he was trying to entice her into anything improper.

However, as they kissed more, Lydia made such a delightful noise of pleasure. But as soon as it escaped her lips, she pulled away quickly from Percy and turned away from him.

"Is something wrong?" Percy asked immediately, fearing the worst. He could then see that she was shaking as she stood there, and his heart broke. "Please don't cry ... I'm so sorry ... I should never have done that, you have nothing to ..."

But then, to his relief, he heard that she was laughing, not crying. When she turned to reassure him that she was all right, he saw tears streaming down her face from laughing so hard. "I'm sorry," Lydia was finally able to get out, "I'm not laughing at you; I just cannot believe I made that noise! I've never made a sound like that in my life!"

Percy laughed right along with her, and when they were finally able to catch their breath, they wandered down the aisles together. Every few steps, Lydia would stop to admire a plant.

Percy cursed himself for having not listened more closely when Georgiana was telling him about all of the different varieties so that he might have been able to impress Lydia with that information now. But as he could not, he enjoyed the comfortable silence between the two of them. The only sound in the conservatory was their feet hitting the floor, and Lydia quietly humming to herself.

"What are you singing?" Percy asked gently. Lydia stopped immediately and froze.

"You know, I did not even realize I was doing that," she commented. "I believe it is something by that fellow Mozart if my memory serves me correctly."

"Really?" Percy asked her. "Do you enjoy his music?"

"Oh, very much so," Lydia replied. "I believe he may be the finest musician of our age. I heard his Magic Flute some time ago, and I

have not been able to stop trying to play it on our pianoforte.”

Percy stopped walking. “You play the pianoforte?” he asked, surprised.

Lydia nodded at him but kept walking down the aisle. “Certainly. I’ve been playing since I was very young, and when I play, it is one of the few places where I feel at peace. The rest of the time, my head is so full of thoughts and worries that I can hardly concentrate. But when I am playing, there is the music, and nothing else.”

“I would very much like to hear you play sometime soon,” Percy said eagerly. “I hope that is not too forward of me to request that.”

Lydia giggled and bent down to smell a brightly coloured rhododendron. “Percy, I do believe the way that our lips met back there was far more forward than you asking to hear me play the pianoforte.”

Percy shoved his hands in his pockets, chuckled, and then responded, “I suppose you are right.”

Another silence grew between them as Lydia continued waltzing up and down the rows and rows of plants, while Percy admired her as she walked. Her gown was lightly dragging on the floor behind her, her hair falling upon the nape of her neck, swishing back and forth as she walked. It was almost hypnotic, and Percy found himself unable to think of much else beyond how badly he wanted to kiss her on her exposed part of her back. But then, he finally snapped out of his daze and thought of something intelligent to say to Lydia.

“The way you feel about music is how I feel about books,” he informed her. When Lydia heard him speak, she immediately stopped walking and faced him. She was looking at him with such genuine interest that it made his heart ache for her. “I find that my thoughts constantly wander throughout the day, but when I have sat down with an engrossing book, I get swept away by the words.”

Lydia took a seat on the stool just to her left and crossed her arms in front of her. “I am so glad to hear that you enjoy reading as well!” she cried happily. “What sorts of books do you enjoy reading?”

“Everything and anything that catches my attention,” Percy said happily. “I love mysteries, intrigue, love stories, adventure novels ...”

“Adventure novels?” Lydia’s interest was piqued by that mention. “Which ones?”

Percy thought back for a moment to the last one that he had read. “Lately, I’ve greatly been enjoying the books by Elliot Havershaw; have you read any of them?” Lydia shook her head. “If you enjoy adventures, then I can promise you that you will love these books. And the best part is, there is a rumour that Elliot Havershaw is only a pen name for a female writer!”

Lydia’s eyes widened, and her jaw dropped open. “You can’t be serious!” she cried delightedly.

“I’m quite serious,” Percy responded. “And if you haven’t read those books, I would be happy to lend them to you.”

“Really?” Lydia asked, rising from the stool. “You’d be willing to do that?”

Percy shrugged. “Of course. I have a wide variety of books in my library, and so knowing that any of my own books were bringing you delight would make me so happy,” he told her.

Lydia began blushing, and then quickly said, “In that case, I must bring you a copy of my favourite adventure book. That way, it will be a trade and not just a lend!”

Percy laughed at her insistence upon making things fair but did not tease her about it. “I would enjoy that very much,” he commented. He looked back out across the lawn and saw that the great hall was far less full than it had been when they’d left. “Oh dear,” he worried aloud, “it seems that people are beginning to leave. We should return to the party.”

Lydia looked towards the Lucas’ estate disappointedly, and then said, “I suppose that we should, shouldn’t we. But thank you ever so much for showing me this magical place, and please do tell Georgiana how much I enjoyed it.”

Percy stopped himself from scoffing and then responded, “I’m not sure that I will be able to complete that last task, I’m afraid.”

Lydia cocked her head to the side and furrowed her brows. “Why not?” she asked indignantly.

“Because,” Percy said with an amused smile on his face, “then I will have to explain what you and I were doing in here during the party, and I do believe my sister will discover our true motives almost immediately.”

Lydia continued looking confounded for an instant and then burst out laughing. “I hadn’t even thought of that!” she cried amusedly. “Then I suppose I shall just have to have her invite me over so that I can see this place ‘for myself’. I will need to practice my surprised look, however, as I’m afraid I’m a truly terrible actress.”

Lydia then proceeded to show Percy some of her ‘surprised looks’, and Percy practically doubled over with laughter. But then he remembered that he had to get them back to the estate in a hurry, and so he grabbed Lydia’s hand, and they began running back together.

As they ran through the fields in the darkness, trying to stifle their laughter once more, Percy realized that he’d never felt more alive. His heart was pounding in his ears; he had Lydia’s warm hand clasped within his, and the light of the party was calling to them. He wondered why he hadn’t done something like this before and then realized; it was because he had never had a woman as wonderful as Lydia to partake in this small adventure.

When they reached the house, they sneaked in the same door to the sitting room they had come out of. Percy was relieved to see that Mabel was not in the room, but that also concerned him. He let go of Lydia’s hand immediately, and the pair returned to the seats they had occupied before. And then, in a moment of brilliance, Percy grabbed a book from the nearby table, and he and Lydia pretended to be consulting it together.

When Mabel returned to the room, she did not look pleased. “Where in heaven’s name have the two of you been?” she asked, annoyed. “I

searched this house from top to bottom, and when I could not find you, I then proceeded outside. What mischief have you been up to?!"

"Mabel," Lydia said calmly, "I am so sorry to have caused you concern. Percy wanted to show me a book that he thought I would enjoy, so we went into Mr Lucas' library. We came back here immediately afterwards. I think that we must have been in different rooms when you were searching for us, I do apologize profusely."

Mabel gave the two young people a hard look and then held out her hand for Percy to place the book he was holding in it. She brought it so that she could read the title and then read aloud, "The Complete History of the North American Catfish?"

Lydia controlled her laughter and did not let any come out. "Yes," she said in a very even tone. "I was speaking with Percy about my desire to visit North America one day, and so he went and found this book for me. We both discovered it was far ... drier than we had hoped."

Mabel obviously did not believe a single word that Lydia was telling her, but she dropped the subject, for which Percy was eternally grateful. "The carriage is awaiting us outside. Bid His Grace a good night, and then meet me in the front hall," she ordered her charge.

Lydia nodded dutifully, and then Mabel made a quick exit from the room. When the door had swung shut, Percy was stunned that she had left the two of them alone in the same room together. But whatever her reasoning was for doing so, he was incredibly happy she had chosen to do it.

He quickly turned to Lydia and said, "Thank you for the most wonderful evening that I've had in quite some time." He leaned in and

kissed her innocently on the cheek, as there was no one around.

That wasn't enough for Lydia, however. She smirked, and then leaned forwards and planted a long, sensual kiss on Percy's lips. It was so inviting and seductive that Percy just wanted to lie her down on the couch to their left and then make love to her right then and there. But as he could not, he just made sure that there was as much passion in the kiss on his end as there was on hers.

When Lydia finally pulled away from Percy, she looked very proud of herself. "I shall very much look forward to the next time I see you, Percy." And then she walked away from him and out of the room. The second the door clicked shut, Percy knew he was in trouble. Lydia had taken his heart with her, and it was clear that she was never going to give it back.

Chapter 13

For a few days after their meeting at the Lucas' ball, Lydia couldn't stop thinking about Percy. She, of course, updated Marianne on all that had happened, but there were certain parts of their encounter that she kept to herself.

For example, she did not share with her friend that they had kissed, as she didn't trust even Marianne to keep that a secret, as well as a few of the more intimate admissions they'd made to each other. Lydia was revelling in every memory she had of the night, and she did not intend to move past it any time soon.

However, after about a week, Lydia became concerned that she might not see Percy again for quite some time. She knew that he likely wasn't going to call to court her, as they were not yet at that point in their relationship, and so all she could do was hope that some gathering would arise so that the two of them would have an excuse to see each other.

Lydia tried her best to keep her mind focused on other things while she was waiting to hear of upcoming events that Percy would be attending. She attempted to throw herself into her needlework and household chores, but nothing seemed to be keeping her attention quite like Percy was.

And so eventually, she allowed herself a short period in the evening to daydream about him. She thought of it as her reward at the end of the day, and when she allowed herself to fantasize about what it would be like to be married to a man like Percy, her thoughts tended to run away with themselves.

Exactly a week and a half after the Lucas ball, an invitation arrived in the mail for Lydia, her parents, and Mabel to attend a small gathering at the Wentworth estate. When her father handed her the invitation, Lydia was so stunned that she practically dropped it. She couldn't have imagined a more perfect excuse to see Percy, but she also couldn't understand how her family had been invited.

When she called upon Marianne the next day, it turned out that she had been invited as well. Now Lydia was even more confused. Marianne's family and the Wentworths had almost no connection. Why on earth were both families being invited to this exclusive party? In Lydia's heart of hearts, she hoped that Percy had spoken up and requested that she and Marianne be invited, but she thought that there was likely some other, far less romantic reason.

After a great deal of excitement, preparation, gossiping, and dreaming, Lydia and Marianne found themselves ready to go on the night of the party. Marianne was wearing a sultry red gown which Lydia was secretly quite jealous of, as Lydia only had the same dress that she'd worn to the first party.

It did fit her beautifully, and it was such a fun, yellow colour, but she was mildly disappointed that her family could not afford a new gown for such an auspicious occasion. However, she set aside her disappointment and was determined to have as wonderful an evening as possible.

Marianne and Lydia travelled in separate carriages with their families to the party, but when they arrived, the two girls immediately found each other and did not stray from one another.

Lydia's father, Rodrick Seymour, was deep in conversation with Marianne's mother, Juliet Haggerston, a trained nurse who often assisted Dr Seymour on some of his more difficult calls. Meanwhile, Mabel, Gertrude, Vivian Seymour, and Peter Haggerston were off in the corner making polite conversation with each other.

Lydia and Marianne honestly did try to stay close to their parents and their chaperones, but the 'small gathering' that the Wentworths had advertised ended up being far busier than either young woman had expected. They found themselves swept away from their families by the crowd, but that didn't much matter. Lydia was so excited by the prospect of seeing Percy that she didn't care what else happened that night, as long as she could see him.

Thankfully, Lydia's wish was granted quite quickly. She was scanning the crowd for her handsome duke when she felt someone squeeze her hand. Her heart soared, and then she turned around to face Percy, who looked just as happy to see her as she was to see him.

"Good evening, Lyd – I mean, Miss Seymour," he said respectfully with a playful wink of his eye. "You look quite lovely if I might say so myself."

Lydia felt herself blush as she tried to think of something intelligent to say. She could feel herself getting distracted by Percy's good looks and dazzling eyes but knew she couldn't just stand there and stare at him.

"Thank you, Your Grace," Lydia finally managed to say as she gave him a polite curtsy. "That coat suits you very well, is it new for the occasion?"

Percy beamed at her. "How did you know?" he asked coyly, and Lydia

allowed herself a small giggle. Then, Percy turned to Marianne and said quietly, “Miss Haggerston, might I impose upon you to cover for Lydia and I so that I might show her some books in the library ... by ourselves?”

Immediately, Marianne took her job very seriously. “It would be my pleasure, Your Grace,” she said. “What do you suggest I tell anyone who wonders where you’ve gone?”

Percy pondered this for a moment, and then said, “I’m not sure. However, I trust that you will be able to come up with something ... inventive yet believable.” He gave her a wink, and Marianne nodded dutifully.

“No one shall know where you have gone, mark my words,” Marianne promised. Lydia gave her a peck on the cheek as thanks, and then she and Percy disappeared into the crowd towards the library.

When they were out of the main room and heading down the empty hallway, Percy and Lydia allowed themselves to relax a little. They did not yet hold hands, but as they walked, Lydia could feel the edge of Percy’s fingers gently brushing up against hers. Every time they touched, a shiver shot up her spine, and she was yearning to be in his arms once more.

Finally, after what felt like the longest walk in the world, Lydia and Percy came upon the library. When Percy pushed open the door and ushered Lydia inside, she gasped. It was the most incredible room she had ever seen. There were plush, comfortable chairs scattered all around the room, plants crawled up the sides of bookshelves and walls, and a fire roared in the fireplace. Lydia thought that this was the kind of room that she could live in for the rest of her life and be very content.

“My goodness,” she said at last, walking over to a shelf and running her fingers along the spines of the books. “I’ve never seen anything like this. How many volumes do you have in your collection?”

Percy chuckled and put his hands in his pockets. “That’s a very good question, and I think that my mother would be able to answer that question far better than I. There are thousands upon thousands of books in here, as all of my family members have been avid readers since ... well, forever,” he explained. Lydia paused at the end of one bookshelf and looked back at Percy, who was going to a shelf on the other side of the room.

“Are you looking for something?” she asked.

“Yes,” Percy responded without turning around, “the book that I told you about the last time we spoke. I wanted to have it ready to give to you tonight, but I have not been able to find it.” Percy continued searching through the titles, bending high and low, trying to locate the adventure book that he had promised to lend Lydia.

“Isn’t that funny,” Lydia remarked. “I wasn’t able to find the book that I wanted to lend to you either. Perhaps our books have run away together, never to be seen again!”

Percy turned around, and when he did, he had a mischievous look on his face. “That sounds like a simply heavenly idea,” he commented. “Do you suppose that our books were married in an intimate ceremony held here on the grounds with only their closest friends and family in attendance?”

Lydia could tell from the tone of his voice that Percy was not just speaking about the books; he was telling her what he thought they might do together one day. She didn't miss a beat. "I think that our books would have liked that very much," she responded slyly. "And I bet that once they were married, they enjoyed a lovely honeymoon in a cosy cottage where they could hole up together and not be bothered by another ... book for a very long time."

Percy chuckled, and it sent Lydia's heart into a flutter. "That sounds like just the right honeymoon for our books," he said quietly. He started moving in towards her, and with each step he took, Lydia became more excited. "Do you think that they just read each other the whole time that they were in the little cottage together? Or ... was there anything else they did?"

At the mention of this, Lydia's heart began pounding. Of course, she knew what he was alluding to, but there was some small part of her that was terrified that if she continued in the direction she thought the conversation was heading that Percy might tease her. Perhaps he was not speaking about making love at all; perhaps he was just harmlessly flirting and talking about ... kissing, or something innocent like that.

And so, Lydia decided to start off slowly. "Oh no," she said with a small smile on her face. "There were many other things they did together. They baked delicious bread, drank so much tea that their bellies couldn't handle it, and ..." but then she trailed off. She had wanted to say something seductive but had lost her nerve.

Percy, however, had not. "And perhaps they spent a good deal of time together ... in bed," he continued for her in a deep, seductive voice. "Perhaps they'd heard about something very ... pleasing that they could do together there and wanted to see if all of the rumours were true about how incredible it was."

By now, Percy was standing in front of Lydia. He took one of her hands and lifted it to his mouth, giving it a gentle kiss. Lydia could feel herself being swept away by her desire for Percy, and she was worried that if she gave into it much more, she wouldn't be able to stop. "I've heard a few of those rumours as well," Lydia said bravely, and she noticed that Percy's eyes widened for a moment with excitement. "But of course, they're only from my married friends," she said, remembering herself."

Percy nodded emphatically. "Oh, of course, of course," he assured her. But then, he took another step in towards her, and she felt his whole self pressed right up against her. She gasped quietly, as she had never felt a man like this before, and she wanted him so very, very badly. "But while it is only when you are married that you're able to partake in the ultimate pleasure, that doesn't mean that we can't ... tease ourselves beforehand, right?"

Lydia was finding it increasingly difficult to keep a clear head. "Right, right," she said quietly. "There are always little things we can do to ... make the wait a little easier."

And then, in the boldest move that Lydia had ever made in her life, she ran her hand up Percy's leg, gently grazed his manhood with her fingers, and then brought them to rest on his chest. She watched his eyes carefully as she did this, and to her delight, saw his pupils dilate when she grazed his cock. That was the reaction she was hoping for.

Percy looked as though he needed a minute to recover from that. Lydia giggled a little, unable to control herself, but she stopped laughing immediately when Percy gently placed his hand on one side of her neck. He gazed deep into her eyes and ran his thumb along the side of her jaw. "And what would you say," he whispered, leaning in so that his lips were just above her ear, "to receiving a little teasing yourself?"

Lydia had to concentrate very hard to keep her breathing level and not hyperventilate from the arousal that she was feeling. “Y ... yes ...” she whispered back to him, and then she noticed that his earlobe was very close to her mouth. She placed her hand on the back of Percy’s neck to draw him into her a little closer, and then took his earlobe in her mouth. She wasn’t sure if Percy would find it arousing, but when she heard him emit a very quiet moan, she smiled to herself and began gently sucking on his ear.

As she did that, Percy danced his hand down the front of Lydia’s neck to her chest. He rested his hand there for a moment because he was too aroused to do anything more at that moment, and then he slipped his fingers just inside of Lydia’s dress. He had not yet touched her nipple, and he seemed to be waiting for something before he did it.

“Please,” Lydia whispered into Percy’s ear, “touch me.”

That was all Percy needed to hear. He drew Lydia backwards so that her back was pressed up against the bookshelf behind them and he could press himself up against her more. They began madly kissing each other, desperate to feel the other’s lips upon theirs.

Lydia could feel her skin becoming warmer as the intimacy between the two got hotter, and then when Percy tugged down her dress, moved his face down to her breast, and began sucking on her nipples and kissing her breasts, she couldn’t help quietly crying out.

Lydia put one hand on Percy’s head, knitted her fingers through his hair, and placed the other hand on the bookshelf above her head to brace herself. Percy passionately kissed her breasts with all haste, as though he was scared that they’d be intruded on at any moment. Lydia worried that for a moment as well, but then when Percy put a hand upon her waist and squeezed it to tell her how badly he wanted

her, all her worries disappeared.

Lydia held on for as long as she could, and then when she could feel herself getting wetter than she could handle between her legs, she pulled Percy back up to eye level and said, "I don't know how much longer I can handle this teasing before ... before ..."

Percy met her eye and gave her a wicked smile. "Oh Lydia," he growled in her ear, "whatever are you afraid you might do if I keep going?"

But Lydia decided to seize the moment where Percy could be caught off-guard, and so she reached down and put her hand around his cock. It was beautifully timed, wiping the smug grin from Percy's face and replacing it with knitted eyebrows and a dropped jaw. "Oh God," Percy muttered as he became more and more distracted. Lydia reached in beneath Percy's pants and felt him in her hands for real for the first time.

Her eyes widened. "Wow," she mumbled, unable to stop herself. "You're ... very, very big," she commented with a mischievous grin on her face as she bit her lip.

Percy cocked an eyebrow and put his hands on the bookshelf on either side of her head. Lydia felt trapped by him, and she absolutely loved it. "Do you think you could still handle me?" Percy growled.

Lydia chuckled seductively. "Oh, Percy," she whispered back, "I think the real question is whether or not you can handle me."

And then, Lydia sunk down onto her knees, pulled off Percy's pants and slipped him in her mouth all in one swift movement. Percy made an audible groan that was so loud he had to cover his mouth. "Oh, oh my God," Lydia heard him saying through his clamped mouth.

She decided to keep going. She moved him in and out of her, very slowly at first, letting him savour the feeling of her tongue pressed up against the base of his rock hard member. When she looked up at him and saw him making fists with his hands and silently moaning with his mouth open, she began sucking on him and putting him right to the back of her throat. She took it too far once and made herself gag a little, and so she had to pull out for a moment. She stood back up and caught her breath, and then said to Percy, "I'm so sorry about that."

Percy looked utterly baffled. "About what?" he asked. "The gag? You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for, that was the hottest thing that you could have done." He looked her in the eyes to make sure that she was hearing him, and then he said, "Now ... shall we test and see how you'll do with my tongue on you?"

Lydia could hardly believe her ears, but she nodded emphatically. Percy pulled her over to a chair by the window, had her sit down, and then when he saw that she was comfortable, he dove beneath her skirts. Lydia was feeling a little self-conscious because no man had ever done any of this to her before, but as soon as she felt Percy's lips upon her, she regretted nothing.

"Oh Percy," Lydia moaned as he began licking her wetness with his tongue. She couldn't believe that not only did Percy want to kiss her, but now he was performing the most intimate act of them all on her. She saw his head bobbing up and down beneath her skirts and felt his tongue and his lips making her clitoris feel so aroused that she could hardly bear it. She put her hands down on the arms of the chair and gripped them tightly to stop herself from crying out too loudly. "Oh ... Oh yes ..." she groaned so quietly that she didn't think Percy could hear her.

But then, Lydia felt Percy slip a finger inside her and continue licking, and that was more than she could take. She leaned back so that her clitoris was pressed right up against his mouth, and he licked it so furiously while moving his finger inside of her in such a pleasurable way that Lydia instantly felt something building up inside her. She had never felt this before, and so at first she was rather baffled by it, but when she could feel her pleasure increasing as it developed, she realized what was going to happen.

“Percy,” she whispered frantically, “if you keep going, I’m afraid of what I might do.”

Percy stopped and pulled his head out from underneath her skirt. “Afraid as in you’d like me to stop, or afraid as in you’ve never felt like this before?” he asked kindly.

Lydia’s heart was pounding faster than ever before, and she was beginning to lose the feeling in her fingers. “Never ... felt like this before,” she managed to get out, and when she did, an amused smile wrapped itself around Percy’s lips.

“Then let’s find out what’s going to happen,” he replied before diving back under her skirts. He returned his finger within her, and with his other hand, he reached out and pulled her hips closer towards him. And then, when he began kissing and licking her once again, Lydia felt the unusually wonderful feeling returning.

She put her hand over her mouth to quiet herself, and then when Percy moved his finger one last time inside her, it was as though a cannon had gone off within her. Lydia was thrown back against the chair as the ultimate feeling of arousal hit her like a wave. She was

hardly aware that there was liquid spurting out from between her legs and all over Percy because she couldn't focus on anything else beyond the pleasure.

When she finally came down from her orgasm, Lydia was panting and gasping as though she had just run a mile. Percy emerged from between her legs with a huge smile on his face. When she saw him, she said, "Oh Percy, I'm so sorry, I didn't realize that I would ..."

"Lydia," Percy said sternly, taking her hand, "if you apologize for any of that, I shall never speak to you again. That was the most extraordinary thing that I have ever witnessed ... and I do hope that I get to make you experience that again soon."

Percy had such an earnestly pleased look upon his face that Lydia couldn't help giggling. He then helped her to her feet, which were shaky at best, and then they set about ensuring that all of their clothes were appropriately adjusted so that no one knew what they had been up to in the library. When they were ready, Percy took Lydia's hand, pulled her into him, and gave her one long, lasting kiss. "Lydia," he whispered tenderly, "I must confess to you that I am developing amorous feelings for you ... as if that wasn't already plainly obvious."

Lydia laughed and then looked at him very seriously. "Percy, I'm afraid I must also tell you that I'm beginning to feel the same way about you," she replied with a goofy grin on her face.

"I'm very glad to hear that," he responded, and they started walking together towards the library door. "And if you'd ever like us to ... tease one another again ..."

"Yes," Lydia answered enthusiastically. "Whenever we are given a

chance again.”

Percy chuckled at her enthusiasm, and then the pair walked out of the door together. Thankfully, there was no one in the hallway, and they could return to the party without anyone noticing. Or so they thought.

Chapter 14

As soon as they returned to the crowd, Percy was tugged away by some important person from society, and as he left, he gave Lydia an apologetic look. She waved encouragingly at him and then began looking around for Marianne. However, she was immediately practically tackled by Georgiana Wentworth.

“Lydia, there you are!” she cried when she came upon her. “I’ve been looking for you all evening! Where have you been?”

Lydia felt the colour coming to her cheeks, so she knew she had to answer quickly before she blushed too much and gave herself away. “Your brother showed me the library,” she answered truthfully. “It is such an extraordinary collection. I’m so envious that you can access it whenever you want!”

Georgiana, however, did not look as happy. “Yes, yes, sure, sure,” she said, brushing the compliment off. “A library is a library. But did Percy show you my greenhouse yet?!”

Lydia smiled to herself. “No, he hasn’t, would you like to show me?” she asked, and instead of answering, Georgiana just pulled her in the direction of the room of flowers. Lydia had to ask her to slow down no less than three times, and thankfully as they went, Lydia was able to spot Marianne and signal to her that she had returned from her time with Percy.

When the two young women finally made it across the back lawn to

the conservatory, Lydia did some of the best acting she'd ever done and pretended that this was the first time she'd seen the collection of plants.

Georgiana, of course, was positively thrilled by Lydia's reaction, and the girls spent the next few minutes going around the conservatory, with Georgiana spouting off information about every plant species like it was her job. Lydia was so happy to see Georgiana so enthusiastic about something, and she hoped that she would continue to grow her love for plants.

After Georgiana had given her a tour of all of her favourite species, the two young women sat on the wicker chairs at the ends of the aisles and talked for a few minutes. "I'm so happy that you showed me this, Georgiana," Lydia confided in her. "I don't think I've ever seen a finer collection of plants in my life, and even though they all require such specialized care, you somehow manage to tend to all of them. Do you have anyone assisting you?"

Georgiana looked down at her shoes sheepishly, and Lydia sincerely hoped that she had not offended the young woman. Thankfully, however, Georgiana responded with, "That's one of the nicest things anyone has ever said to me about my plants. I always thought that keeping such a great collection and knowing so much about it made me ... I don't know, unfashionable in some way."

Lydia could hardly believe her ears. "Made you unfashionable?!" she cried. "The furthest thing from it! In my experience, it is always better to be too enthusiastic about something compared to not enthusiastic enough. If we dampen our passions for other people, what good does it do us? I think that you should teach yourself as much as possible about these species and then you can wow every person who you bring in here. You are an incredibly intelligent young woman, and I cannot imagine anyone thinking that you were 'unfashionable' for being an excited naturalist!"

Georgiana giggled excitedly. “Well, thank you, Lydia,” she said gratefully. “You have no idea how much your words have buoyed my spirits, and I can tell that they have done the same for my brother.”

“Do you think so?” Lydia asked her seriously.

“Oh yes, very much indeed!” Georgiana responded, nodding along to emphasize her point. “Ninety-five per cent of the time before he met you, Percy walked around with a scowl on his face. Nothing seemed to truly make him happy before. He was so concerned with what society thought of him all the time, and his preoccupation with that began bleeding from his public life into his private one. It seemed like he was wearing a mask all the time to hide how he was truly feeling.”

“But now that you’re in his life,” Georgiana continued, “he seems to have left his mask in his bedroom each day when he comes down for breakfast.”

Lydia was very intrigued. “What do you mean by that exactly?” she questioned her.

“It’s like you said,” Georgiana responded. “Percy has always suppressed every true desire, passion, or excitement that he’s felt in his life because he’s always been made to feel that what he cares about isn’t ‘proper’. Like medicine, for example. Society doesn’t give a fig if a duke knows how to stop an artery from spewing blood, what matters is if he knows how to act at a public gathering. And because he’d been fed this idea for his whole life, he’d become a bit ... dry before you stepped into his life. All he cared about before were rules and doing what was right. But now that you’re here ... he’s slowly becoming himself again.”

Lydia felt her admiration for Percy igniting in her chest and then flowing out through all of her extremities. She could hardly believe what Georgiana was saying – was he truly that miserable before they'd met? What was it about her that made him feel like he could be himself? Lydia thought that she was just as bad as Percy; she spent a great deal of time worrying about what was right and wrong in society's eyes. But perhaps her class, or lack thereof, offered her a bit more freedom when it came to matters of enthusiasm. She had never considered that before.

"I am very, very glad to hear that, thank you for telling me, Georgiana," Lydia told her, taking her hand and squeezing it. "Your brother has had the same effect on me, I think. Perhaps that is what happens when you meet someone who you truly care for."

Those last few words tumbled out of Lydia's mouth before she could stop them, and once she'd said them aloud, she panicked as to what Georgiana would say. She watched Georgiana's face carefully, waiting to see any signs of anger or outrage, but none ever came. It seemed that Georgiana had been expecting this.

"I believe you are right," Georgiana said, making no mention of what Lydia had said. She breathed a sigh of relief and felt some of the tension that she hadn't realized she'd been holding leave her upper body. "And I understand the feeling that both of you are experiencing because that's how I feel every time I am with ..."

Georgiana suddenly pulled her hand out of Lydia's and looked at her sheepishly. Lydia stared at her more intently. "Georgiana," she said carefully, "I do not mean to intrude on business that I know is not my own, but ... do you happen to be speaking about Arthur?"

Georgiana looked at her as though she had just asked her if she was in love with a dog. “Arthur?” she asked in disbelief. “Goodness gracious no! No, my speaking with Arthur is nothing more than a way to infuriate my brother. Arthur Middleton is an ancient man who I would not allow to touch me with a fifteen-foot poking stick.”

Lydia was positively flabbergasted. “You’re ... you’re not speaking about Arthur?” she asked in disbelief.

“Absolutley not!” Georgiana cried. “But please, forget I even said that about somebody else, there isn’t anyone else, I ... I was just trying to empathize with you.”

Suddenly, Georgiana sprung up and dashed from the conservatory. “Georgiana, wait!” Lydia called after her, but the young woman had already run through the main doors and was now probably halfway across the field headed back towards the party. Lydia stared after her for a few moments, unsure of what to do with herself.

Should I follow her? she wondered. I don't believe for a second that she was 'only trying to empathize with me'. I bet there is someone else who Georgiana has fallen for, and I must find out who it is so that I can speak with her about it before Percy finds out!

Lydia stood up and was about to go after Lydia, but she realized there was no point. Georgiana had probably made it back to the house by now, and there was no way that she would want to talk to Lydia after an exit like that. And so Lydia decided to take her time going back to the house.

She wandered through the rows and rows of plants, stopping to smell the heavenly scented flowers that popped up every few pots and

admire all of the exotic species that Georgiana kept in there. She went over all that had transpired tonight and couldn't believe that it had all happened to her. She chuckled to herself and finally went through the doors of the greenhouse, rejoining Marianne and her family at the party.

Chapter 15

The next morning, Lydia found herself rushed off her feet by all the household tasks that needed doing. She was ashamed that she had let them slide for so long and felt even guiltier when she saw how much it impacted her mother.

“I had planned on baking a pie tonight,” Penelope Seymour mentioned to her daughter around lunchtime, “but oh, we don’t have enough butter made for the crust. That is a shame, but oh well.”

Lydia felt the guilt gnawing at her stomach like a wild dog eating an animal’s carcass. Penelope never complained about anything, which made it all the more difficult when Lydia found herself having done something wrong. Then, she not only felt bad about having made a mistake, she also felt horrible that her mother felt she had to put on a happy face about it and move along as though nothing had happened.

“I am so sorry, Mama,” she said tenderly, touching her mother on the shoulder. “I shall ensure that you have enough butter for your recipe! I will return in a few minutes.”

Lydia began walking quickly out of the kitchen until she heard her mother call behind her, “Where are you going, Lyddie? I’m sure we could figure something out instead!”

Lydia turned back to her mother and gave her a knowing look. “Mama,” she said, “you have had to make so many exceptions for father every time he is called away on a sudden emergency or has to

stay late because of a sick child. I think the least I can do for you is ensure that we have enough butter so that you can make the pie that you'd planned for dinner."

Penelope sighed and threw up her hands in defeat. "Thank you, dearest," she said rather appreciatively and then disappeared upstairs to go and tend to something.

Lydia grabbed her cloak and opened the front door when she came face to face with, "Edmund!" she cried in surprise. When she realized her error in what she had called him, she said, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to call you that, I meant ..."

"No, no, please!" Edmund reassured her. "Feel free to refer to me as Edmund, that would make me rather happy, actually." He smiled at her, and for the first time, Lydia realized what lovely teeth he had. She was momentarily distracted by how white and nice-looking they were until she remembered herself.

"I do not mean to sound rude," Lydia continued, "but what are you doing here? Did you send word for me and I never received it?"

"Oh no," Edmund said enthusiastically, "I ... I just came here on a whim and wanted to see if you would consider joining me on a walk through the enchanting woods that you have surrounding your home. With your chaperone too, of course."

Lydia opened and closed her mouth a few times, looking for the right words to say. She wasn't sure that she actually wanted to go for a walk with Edmund, as she did not want to lead him on in any way. However, there was still a small voice in the back of her mind reminding her that Percy had not asked to court her yet, and so she

should not shut down all her options. Remembering this, she finally responded, "That would be lovely. I shall go and fetch Mabel."

Lydia ran back inside and called to Mabel, who had been assisting her mother with the washing. When Lydia explained to her what was going on, she looked very pleased. "I am very happy to see you giving that fine young man a chance," she said warmly. "He is a duke, after all," she added. While Mabel probably meant that to be an encouraging sentiment, it only served to make Lydia more anxious.

And so, the three of them set out towards the woods. Edmund seemed as nervous as Lydia was as he couldn't stop playing with his hands. Lydia had never met a duke who got nervous around young women, and so seeing Edmund this way endeared him to her further. "So," Edmund said, trying to start up a conversation, "how is your family? I hope they have been keeping well."

Ugh, Lydia thought to herself. Is this really what our conversation is going to consist of? I thought that if we were to go out on our 'own' like this, it might allow us to finally have some actual conversation together. If he is going to make small talk the whole time, then I am going to cut this short and go back home.

Even though she thought this, Lydia still went ahead and answered Edmund's question politely. "They have been quite well, thank you," she responded. They were now reaching one of Lydia's favourite parts of the woods. It was a clearing that had grass that was so light and delicate, it felt like walking through a field of feathers. The knowledge that they were just about to walk through this part of the wilderness buoyed Lydia's spirits. "My father has been quite busy as there have been quite a few cases of the common cold about town, and you know how dramatic society people can be about even the slightest illness."

Lydia laughed at her own comment but was surprised when Edmund

didn't. She looked at him, and he had his brow knitted together in a way that told her he didn't understand what she had said. "I just meant," she clarified, "that there are certain members of our community who tend to over-exaggerate symptoms to get more attention."

Edmund still looked utterly confused. "Why would someone do that?" he asked, flummoxed by the idea. "Don't they know what a waste of time that is for your father?"

Lydia sighed to herself and decided to drop the subject. She had just commented as a joke and did not feel like pursuing that topic further. "Yes, it is. How is your family? I understand that you have two younger brothers?"

Now, Edmund chuckled. "I certainly do," he said proudly. "They're growing up to be fine young men, but unfortunately without my father's presence to guide them, they are always getting up to some mischief or another."

"I can certainly understand that," Lydia said knowingly. "Is that hard on you?"

"It is," Edmund replied, sounding very serious. "My brothers' behaviour is very trying on me, as I have to be an example for the family. And if I am upset when I arrive at a social function, that is all society gossips about for the following weeks."

Lydia opened her mouth and then closed it again. She was about to comment that she hadn't heard any such gossip but decided not to say that. It was obvious that Edmund thought that society cared a great deal more for the slightest turns in his emotional state than they really

did, and so she thought it better to leave him in his blissful ignorance.

“Speaking of gossip,” Edmund said unexpectedly, “I have heard murmurs about town regarding you and the Duke of Wexley. People say that they have seen the two of you spending a long time together at gatherings and even occasionally going off together. Is there any truth to these rumours?”

Lydia felt her throat close up in panic. She could also feel Mabel’s eyes boring into her from behind. She kept walking at the same pace but felt very much like running away from everything right then. “The Duke of Wexley, you say?” she tried to comment naturally. “Yes, I have been seeing him at balls and parties from time to time, but that is just because he and I run in similar circles. My best friend Marianne is well-acquainted with Perc – I mean the Duke of Wexley’s best friend, Lewis Crawford. He and I just sort of ... end up in the same places.”

Lydia’s mind suddenly flashed to the passion that she and Percy had shared in the other night in the library and could feel a pleasurable twinge inside her. But she couldn’t concentrate on it for long, as she knew that she could quickly be drawn into fantasizing about Percy for their whole walk.

Instead, she looked over to Edmund, who looked like he believed her about as much as he believed that pigs could fly. However, he still said, “Ah. I see. Well then, it seems that the rumour mill of society has blown things out of proportion once again!”

Lydia turned her full attention to him. “How exactly have they blown what they’ve seen out of proportion if you don’t mind me asking? What have they said about the Duke of Wexley and me?”

Edmund suddenly looked very uncomfortable and glanced back towards Mabel. "I am not sure that I can say any of this in such polite company," he said awkwardly.

Lydia looked back at Mabel, who now looked as annoyed as Lydia was by not hearing what society had gossiped about her. "No, no," Mabel said, "please go on. It would help us greatly if we knew what was being said about Miss Seymour, Your Grace."

That was very uncharacteristic for Mabel, as she was usually one to squash the topic of gossip as soon as it arose. But Lydia thought that because the gossip pertained to her dear charge she was eager to know what had been said.

"All right," Edmund replied, now looking more uncomfortable than ever. "If I remember correctly, I thought I heard Lady Bratsworth saying to Miss Granger that she thought that you were going after the Duke of Wexley and ..." he trailed off, looking anxiously from Mabel to Lydia and back again. "And," he finally continued, "that you were trying to entrap him so that you could steal his title and his wealth, which someone like you would have otherwise never attained."

Lydia stopped walking. Her heart was pounding in her chest, and she was so angry that she quite literally saw red. She couldn't believe that there was such gossip surrounding her relationship with Percy, as she thought that they were discreet enough that most people wouldn't have noticed them. But evidently, they had, and they were now spreading malicious rumours about Lydia.

She clenched her fists and looked at the ground. She felt Mabel come up beside her and put her hand on her shoulder. "I think that Miss Seymour might be finished with the walk for this afternoon," Mabel said politely.

“Oh yes, of course,” Edmund said, sounding very disappointed. “I will walk back with you to the house.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Mabel said firmly. “But thank you for your kindness, and for informing us of the things that have been said about Lydia.”

Mabel steered Lydia away from Edmund, and Lydia obliged her. They began walking back the short distance they had come, and once they were out of earshot of Edmund, Mabel said, “Lydia, no matter what I have said against your behaviour with the Duke of Wexley in the past, I must tell you that you did nothing to warrant that sort of gossip. What is said between society ladies in town is never believed by others in our community, and you should not take a word that young man informed us of to heart.”

Lydia could feel her tears of frustration stinging her eyes. “Thank you, Mabel,” she said gratefully, “but you and I both know very well that isn’t true. Now that a seed has been planted in everyone’s minds, whenever they see Percy and me together, they shall think of nothing but that.”

Lydia allowed a few of the tears that had been collecting in her eyes to trickle down her face. They blurred her vision so that the floor of the forest just looked like one melting pot of green, amber, and brown. She couldn’t believe that people could say such cruel things about her when she had done nothing to warrant them. If there had been rumours about what she and Percy had been doing behind closed doors, that would have made sense, but the fact that they were using Lydia’s class against her was unduly cruel.

“My darling Lydia,” Mabel said softly, “I am not blind. I see the way that you look at Percy every time that you are together and how devastated you are when you’re apart. Is there not a chance that he might wish to court you so that you could have your meetings together in private, as well as with the blessing of both his family and yours?”

Lydia looked sadly at Mabel. “There has been no mention of courting yet,” she replied, and as the words were escaping her lips, a rock fell into her stomach. She realized that she had let Percy take control of her mind and body without even so much as a mention of his desire to formally court her. For all she knew, he could be using her as he pleased, and when he left, her reputation might very well be ruined. She felt her breath becoming shallow because of the panic that was setting in.

But then she remembered that she was not dealing with a scoundrel like Arthur Middleton. It was Percy Wentworth, who she knew was a good, kind person and would not abandon her. But as she tried to reassure herself of that, she began wondering why in heaven’s name Percy hadn’t asked to court her. They had both admitted they had feelings for each other, and it was rather obvious that their passion for each other was unrivalled. Was it really Lydia’s class that was holding Percy back from courting her? Or was there something more holding him back?

“Then Percy must either make the public announcement that he wishes to court you now,” Mabel reminded her, “or you should not continue seeing him. I can tell the depth of your feelings for that young man, but if there is going to be no chance of moving forward with him, then you are wasting precious time on a boy who is toying with your heart!”

Lydia knew that Mabel was right, but there was still something inside her that made her want to wait and see what happened. She was too scared to think about asking Percy directly about courting her, and

she had a feeling that he would eventually explain why he had waited so long to make formal arrangements with her. That consoled her for the time being.

She and Mabel were soon back at the house, and when Lydia got up to the front door, she turned to Mabel and said, "Thank you for removing me from that situation, and thank you for your kind words as always. But I would like to be alone now."

Mabel gave her a knowing look and nodded. "Don't be too hard on yourself, my dear," Mabel reminded her. "You deserve a gentleman who is unafraid of courting you publicly, and if that is neither Percy nor Edmund, then we will find someone to fit the bill perfectly."

Lydia hugged her and went inside without saying another word. She knew Mabel was right, but she needed some time to herself to think about what they had discussed. And so, Lydia took to her room and spent the rest of the day thinking about what might happen with Percy and their relationship going forward.

Chapter 16

The next time that Percy and Lydia saw each other was at a party held by Marianne's family. It was a more informal country ball than the others had been, and Percy was very much looking forward to a setting with less societal pressure where he and Lydia could sneak away and spend some time together.

He was quite surprised to have received an invitation to tonight's festivities, but then he remembered that Marianne must have known about what was going on between him and Lydia. And at the thought of that, he was utterly delighted.

When he arrived at the ball with Lewis and Georgiana in tow, Percy left the two of them talking amicably together to go and see if he could seek out Lydia. He did not find her on his first loop around the house, and when he came upon Lewis and his sister again, Lewis turned to him and said, "Who are you looking for, chap? That Seymour girl?"

Percy shushed him. "Yes," Percy whispered, "but keep your voice down; we don't need the whole room knowing that I'm looking for her. Have you seen her?"

Lewis shook his head and looked to Georgiana. Percy was very pleased to see that his best friend and his sister were getting along so well, as he had assumed that Lewis just thought of Georgiana as his pesky little sister for a long time. But now that they were talking as equals at the ball, Percy was very relieved. He was quite happy that Georgiana had matured enough to keep up a polite conversation with his best friend.

“Perce,” Georgiana shouted over the music that had just begun, “why haven’t you spoken with Mama about Lydia? It is plain to everyone in this room that you admire her, so why not ...”

“Georgiana,” Percy said sternly, “do not butt into conversations where your opinions are not wanted, such as this one.”

Georgiana scoffed. “Aren’t you the brother who is always telling me that I should be more mature and act my age?!” she cried. “And now that I’m giving you advice about your admirers like a young woman should, you are rebuking me for having an opinion? Brother dear, I believe you need to get your advice straightened out.”

Percy felt his anger boiling up inside of him almost immediately, but Lewis’ laughter quickly diffused it. “Georgiana, I believe that your wit is becoming as sharp as your brother’s!” he applauded her, and his laughter was so infectious that soon both Georgiana and Percy were also laughing.

But suddenly, Georgiana looked behind Percy and gestured with her head to turn around. He did immediately and was overjoyed to see that Lydia was standing behind him with Marianne beside her.

“Good evening, Percy,” Lydia boldly greeted him and hearing his first name said by her in a public setting made his pulse race.

“Good evening Lydia,” he responded with a smirk on his face. “Might I speak with you for a few minutes?”

Lydia nodded, and then she looked to Marianne, and Percy looked to Georgiana and Lewis. Percy believed that all three wordlessly agreed to cover for them, and moments later, they were setting off across the hall together. They walked until Lydia looked around quickly to make sure no one was about to see them, and then she pulled Percy into a room and shut the door behind them.

Percy laughed as she did so and saw that she had taken them to what looked to be a spare bedroom that Marianne's family kept for guests. "Lydia," he said seductively, looking towards the bed, "was there a specific reason that you brought me in here?"

But when he looked to Lydia, he saw that she was not looking at the bed at all. She was staring at him with her arms crossed, looking quite cross herself. "Yes, there is, and it has nothing to do with that bed," she said abruptly.

Percy cleared his throat and tried to get his head back into position and ready for whatever it was that she wanted to speak about. "Of course," he said seriously, straightening his dark green suit jacket that she had ruffled when she pulled him inside the room. "What is it that you would like to discuss?"

She looked away for a moment, and he couldn't help being taken by her beauty. Her blonde hair was so beautifully done his evening that it didn't look real. Her grey-blue eyes seemed to be clouded by whatever was on her mind, but it only succeeded in adding to her beauty. And her dimples may have been hidden as she was not smiling, but the promise of seeing them at some point that evening buoyed his spirits.

"I'm afraid it is a rather serious topic," she said. Percy nodded at her and tried his best to look like he was taking what she was saying as

seriously as he truly was. “And it has to do with ... you and I.”

Percy’s heart skipped a beat. “The two of us?” he said in a small voice. “Is ... is there something the matter? Have I done something that has made you ...”

“No, no,” she said, understanding where he was going. But she still did not look happy about what needed to be discussed. “I do not wish to part from your company ... in fact, quite the opposite.”

Percy cocked his head to the side, intrigued. “Yes ...” he said, encouraging her along.

“I should just get to the point, shouldn’t I?” she asked herself. She clapped her hands in front of her to give herself some focus. “All right. Here it is. Does my family’s lack of class and money offend you?”

“Lack of – what? No,” Percy quickly responded. “Have I made any mention of anything that would lead you to believe that?”

Lydia shook her head. “It isn’t that you’ve said anything ... it is what you haven’t said.”

Now Percy was well and truly confused. “I ... I don’t understand,” he stammered.

An annoyed look crossed over Lydia’s face and then disappeared just as quickly as it had shown up. “Percy,” she explained patiently, “I am

referring to the fact that you have not formally requested to court me. I think it is plain to both of us as well as everyone around us that there is something developing here. I ... I'm just hesitant to continue in the manner that we were previously without you asking to court me."

Percy could hardly put his thoughts together. He had become so caught up in finding himself falling for Lydia that he hadn't yet considered the consequences, both good and bad, of his actions. Yes, he knew that he admired Lydia a great deal, and the way they had been going along had been very pleasant. He hadn't ever felt this way for a woman before, and so as Lydia was saying these things, he thought *of course, I should formally ask to court her.*

But then, he remembered his mother. His mother, who never set a toe out of line when it came to appearances in society. His mother, who had been telling him since he was a young man that he would marry a well-bred woman. And his mother, who had been gutted when his father died and now relied on Percy a great deal.

At the same time, however, Percy knew that his mother would want him to be with whichever woman made him the happiest. She had been very lucky with Percy's father because he was the love of her life and was also of the same class. And so, Percy decided to tell Lydia the truth.

"I completely understand why you feel that way," Percy commiserated with her, "and I am sorry that I did not do that sooner. The difference in our classes does not bother me at all. In fact, I believe that the fact that we have come from different classes has made me feel more relaxed around you."

Lydia gave him a small smile, and then he continued, "However, I am concerned that my mother will feel differently. I know that she wants

me to be with whoever will make me the happiest, but of course, there are societal expectations that she is constantly reminding me of.”

Now, Lydia was looking rather sad, so Percy knew that he needed to get to his point quickly. “But having said that,” he wrapped up, “my mother does not speak for me, and I know that whoever I choose to love is ultimately my decision. She has given me a great deal of freedom when it comes to my future and who I associate with, so I believe that if I were to court you more formally, there might be a chance that she’d understand.”

Lydia cocked an eyebrow. “There might be chance, you say?” she said mischievously. Percy was relieved to see that she was happy with what he had said.

“Oh yes,” Percy said, feeling himself getting excited as well. He took a step towards her, brushing a stray curl behind her ear. “I believe that there is a very good chance.”

Lydia positively beamed. “Well then,” she said as she stepped closer into him, “I suppose if that is the direction this is going in, then we shouldn’t let this perfectly good bed go to waste, now should we?”

Percy shook his head. “Certainly not. Would you, by any chance, like to ... lie upon it with me?”

Lydia nodded emphatically, and when the two of them lay down in bed together, they immediately kissed and began teasing one another again. This time, Lydia was very generous to Percy, and after they had passionately kissed for a long time, she teased his cock with her mouth. When he tried to pull her up to him so that he could have

some fun between her legs as well, Lydia denied him.

Percy knew that he wouldn't last much longer in Lydia's mouth, though, but when he tried to communicate that by saying desperately, "I ... I can't ... I'm going to," Lydia just kept pumping him in and out of her mouth. Finally, he gave into the pleasure and allowed himself to explode down the back of her throat. It was the most arousing moment of his life so far, to look down as he was climaxing and see Lydia's mouth around him with her eyes gazing up at him.

When he finally stopped pulsating and erupting, Lydia slid him out of her mouth, and he positively pounced on her. "I'm afraid that I must punish you for the torture that you employed upon me there, Miss Seymour," he growled at her.

Lydia smiled wickedly at him. "Oh yes?" she responded with a mischievous grin on her face. "And how would you go about doing that?"

Percy moved so quickly that Lydia didn't even have time to fully understand what was about to happen. He flipped her over onto her back, lifted her from her stomach so that she was standing on all fours, and then began stroking her clitoris.

Lydia cried out quietly with pleasure, and when Percy had played with her enough that she became quite wet, he continued rubbing her exactly as she wanted and then inserted his fingers inside her. When he did, Lydia whispered under her breath, "Yes, please, yes," and Percy knew that he was hitting the right spots.

He kept stroking that special spot inside her that made her legs quake and circling his thumb around her clitoris until he could hear her breath quickening. He then decided to be especially cruel and take it

slower, and Lydia noticed right away. “Wh ... what are you doing?” she panted.

“Oh, just taking my time,” Percy teased in a sultry voice. “I’m savouring every move you’re making, and every sound I’m hearing escape your lips.”

“Mhmm,” Lydia purred, “but you know that you’re ... you’re making me wait longer to release,” she explained as though he didn’t already know what he was doing. “And ... and if you keep doing that, there are going to be serious consequences for you the next ... next time we ...”

Lydia then let out a louder moan, and Percy had to remind her to keep her voice down. “You’re telling me that there’s definitely going to be a next time, Lydia?” he asked her. He watched Lydia nodding desperately and let out a low chuckle. “Well, if you’re promising me that we can do this again ... then I suppose I might ... just might ... give you the ultimate pleasure.”

With that, Percy hiked up Lydia’s skirts a little more so that he could look at her plump, enticing bottom. Lydia took a breath in when she realized what he was doing, but Percy didn’t give her a chance to say anything else. Instead, he put his lips right against the part of her that he had just exposed and flicked his tongue against it.

The moment he did that, Lydia collapsed onto the bed, her juices exploding out of her like a ripe peach. Percy watched her tense and release repeatedly, and was so turned on by watching how her body moved below her skirts that he felt himself getting hard once again.

But he knew that they couldn’t start anything else because people

were likely already starting to wonder where they were. And so instead, he lay down beside Lydia and held her as she finished coming down from her climax.

When she finally stopped shaking and moaning, she pulled herself more tightly inside of his embrace. “Th ... thank you,” she mumbled, kissing his hand, and she pressed herself against him.

Percy kissed the back of her neck and smiled. “I should be the one thanking you,” he whispered. “Watching you take me in while I finished was almost too much for me.”

Lydia giggled and then said the words that made him want to take off his pants and plunge himself deep in between her legs: “I couldn’t help it ... you just tasted so good!”

They both laughed mischievously, with Percy kissing Lydia as they did. Eventually, they were able to pick themselves up off of the bed, and when they had ensured they looked the same way they had when they’d entered the room, they sneaked back out into the still-empty hallway and dashed back to join the party.

When Percy and Lydia re-entered the main room where the party was taking place, Percy was baffled to see that Lewis and Georgiana were no longer with Marianne.

“Hello, loves!” Marianne cried happily, flinging her arms around Lydia when she saw them. “I’m so happy you’re back! We’ve been having such a grand time while you were gone, but it just hasn’t been the same without you!”

Percy could tell that Marianne had got some drink into her somehow, and when he looked to Lydia, he could tell that she knew, too. "Then I am glad that we found you!" Lydia said happily, trying to control her friend's wildly waving arms. "Do you know where Lewis and Georgiana went?"

Marianne shook her head vigorously. "No idea," she mumbled drunkenly. "Lewis said something about looking at the stars and Georgiana ... she whispered something about ... something about a handsome man?"

Percy's stopped breathing for a moment. "A handsome man?" he double-checked with Marianne.

"Mhmm!" Marianne said proudly, as though she had remembered exactly where Georgiana had gone. "She ... she wanted to dance with a handsome man!"

Percy immediately panicked. He didn't say anything but took off through the crowd. He could hear Lydia calling to him but didn't answer her. He had a terrible feeling, and he needed to know if that feeling was correct.

Percy pushed his way through the crowd of people, looking for someone in particular. He knew that Arthur had come to town with that Edmund fellow, and so when he saw him standing in the corner speaking with some important people from society, he inserted himself into the conversation.

"Might I interrupt you for a moment?" Percy shouted above the din of the music. Edmund looked surprised to see him but nodded. Percy led

him over to a quieter corner of the room. “Where is your friend Arthur Middleton this evening?”

Now, Edmund looked even more confused. “I am not sure,” he informed Percy. “I arrived with him this evening, but after we got here, he disappeared somewhere.”

Percy’s hopes were quickly fading. “And what time did you arrive?” he asked, trying not to sound panicked.

Edmund thought. “Around a half-past eight?” he guessed.

That was it. Percy went into a full-on panic, as he and Lydia had disappeared together right around that time. That gave Georgiana just enough time to get together with Arthur, and who knows what they had been up to since then.

“Thank you,” Percy said curtly, and then took his leave of Edmund. He pushed back through the crowd, and as he did, the loud music, heat, and incessant chatter of the guests around him only made him feel more panicked. He started heading towards the doorway in an attempt to go looking for his sister when Lydia suddenly appeared in front of him.

And thankfully, Georgiana was with her.

“Georgiana!” Percy cried, wrapping his arms around his sister.

When he pulled away from her, Georgiana looked as confused as he thought she would. “Whatever are you doing, you fool?” his sister asked him. “You have not embraced me ... ever?”

“Where was she?” Percy asked, turning his attention to Lydia.

He noticed that Lydia and Georgiana shared a look, but there was nothing said between them. “She went for a walk with one of her friends that she saw here this evening,” Lydia answered.

“Yes,” Georgiana confirmed. “Dorothy Pattie and I took a turn about the estate, that was all, you nervous idiot!”

Percy felt immensely relieved. He was so happy that his sister wasn’t with Arthur Middleton that he truly did not care where else she had been.

Lewis then came up beside the trio, and Percy was just as happy to see him. “Good to see you too, chap!” Lewis said when Percy gave him an unexpected hug, too. “What’s this for?”

“Nothing, Lewis, no reason,” Percy informed him. “Just relieved. That’s all.”

But as Percy watched, Lewis looked to Lydia, and they shared a glance that he didn’t understand. However, at that moment, he couldn’t have cared less. He was so happy that that vile man had not ruined his sister, and so he spent the rest of the party enjoying the company of Marianne, Lydia, Lewis, and Georgiana. The five of them were quite a jolly sight.

Chapter 17

The next day, Percy needed to take a trip into town, so he set off quite early. He had a few places that he needed to visit and knew that the earlier he arrived, the sooner he could return home and tend to the business that needed handling there.

But before setting off on his tasks, he took a moment on the river bridge to admire the beauty of the vines that were tumbling from it. It was then Percy noticed a man staring at him from the other end of the bridge. Percy stared back at him until he realized that the man was Edmund.

Percy walked over to him. "Good morning, sir," Percy greeted him. "Thank you very much for your assistance last night, that was a great help."

Edmund tipped his hat to him and smiled. "Glad to have been of service," Edmund said humbly. "Why were you enquiring about my friend? Was there something happening that I missed?"

Percy couldn't think of a good lie fast enough, so he simply told him a simplified version of the truth. "I was afraid that he had run off with a female friend of mine," Percy informed him.

Edmund smiled knowingly and leaned against the side of the bridge. "Ahh yes, unfortunately, Arthur tends to be ruled by his member as opposed to his brain, what a silly man!"

Edmund laughed as though it was a very funny joke, but Percy did not see the humour. "You realize that your friend has ruined the reputations of countless young women with his dalliances, don't you?" Percy asked him.

Edmund stopped laughing abruptly. "Of course I am aware of that, what do you take me for, a fool?" he asked Percy.

"Then why in heaven's name are you laughing about it?" Percy demanded. "These young women were vulnerable and very much in love with your friend. All he does is seduce them and then abandon them when he has got what he wants from them."

Percy didn't realize how loudly he was shouting until he heard his own voice echoing back at him from the gorge below. He could not believe that Edmund was treating the horrendous way that Arthur was acting with these young women as though it was funny.

"My good man," Edmund said condescendingly, "these were classless, meaningless young women. What does it matter if he had a bit of fun with them? They should be honoured to have had any time at all with a man as great as Arthur."

Percy's blood was now boiling. He stepped in towards Edmund, grabbed his collar, and pulled Edmund towards him. Their faces were inches from each other, and Percy snarled, "If you ever refer to any woman as *worthless* ever again, I will hurl you off this bridge without a second thought. Arthur abused his privilege with those ladies, and he should be ashamed of himself."

Edmund, however, did not seem intimidated at all by Percy. He laughed in his face and replied, "Ashamed of himself? Just as you should be because of the behaviour you've exhibited around Miss Seymour?"

Percy abruptly let go of Edmund's collar and took a few steps back. Edmund adjusted his shirt and tugged down his vest and jacket, as though Percy had really ruffled them when he was holding him. "You didn't think I saw the way the two of you were together?" Edmund asked, sauntering closer to Percy. "The way she bats her eyes and treats you like you're the funniest man in the world. And yet ... you haven't requested to court her yet, have you? It would be a shame if someone were to swoop in there and whisk Miss Seymour off her feet, now wouldn't it?"

Percy glared back at Edmund so hard that his right eye began twitching. He was sickened by this man and could not believe that Lydia saw anything redeeming in him. However, he was absolutely right about what he had said about Percy's relationship with Lydia. Percy knew that he was an awful coward for not having asked to court her yet, but there was so much holding him back.

"How dare you speak to me like that," was all Percy could think to spit back at him.

Edmund looked out over the side of the bridge. "Meanwhile, I've already visited Miss Seymour once formally, and I plan on doing it many more times shortly. You know, I think I might even go as far as to say I would propose to her ... and my gut is telling me that she'll say yes."

Edmund turned with a look of smug pride on his face. "If you know how I feel about Miss Seymour," Percy snarled, "then why are you doing this? Do you have feelings for her? Are you madly in love with

her, and can you not imagine the rest of your life without her?”

Edmund shrugged in a non-committal manner. “Miss Seymour is quite beautiful, but there is little about her that is particularly endearing. However, I believe that she will make a hard-working wife, unlike the women who are of the same class that I am. That is why I would like to marry her,” he explained emotionlessly. But then, he added, “Well, that and the fact that I would have the pleasure of watching you be unhappy for the rest of your life, Percy.”

“Did I do something to you that I’ve forgotten about?” Percy found himself shouting at Edmund. “Is there something about my personality that you find so insulting that you feel a need to take Lydia away from me?”

Edmund rolled his eyes as though he was a teenage boy listening to his parents tell him to tidy his room for the fifth time this week. “Oh, don’t take things so *personally*, Percy,” Edmund scolded him. “We live in a society where no one ever truly gets to be happy, so why should you or I be any different?”

“Because,” Percy screamed back at him, “there is an obvious answer to this dilemma! If you do not believe that you love Lydia, then you should not marry her! There are thousands of women of your own class who would throw themselves at you, and yet you’re choosing to go after Lydia because ... because why exactly?”

Again, Edmund shrugged. Percy was stunned how quickly this society gentleman was dissolving into a cruel beast before his very eyes. “I simply enjoy chaos, Percival,” Edmund answered back, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I have lived my whole life by the rules, and so because I have finally discovered one small act through which I can rebel against the system that made me who I am, I am seizing it. And as I get to upset a man who I believe personifies

the very backbone of our upright society in the process – I am speaking about yourself, of course – I figure it could be one of the best moves I'll make in my life.”

With that, Edmund turned on his heel and walked away from Percy without saying another word. Percy was so stunned by the whole conversation that he stood there without moving for a few minutes after Edmund left. *How could this happen?* he wondered to himself as he stood there.

Why would a man take the woman who I believe to be the great love of my life from me ... with no good reason to? It is not as though marrying Lydia would do wonders for his position in society or increase his wealth, and he isn't even doing it because he has an issue with me. He is simply, as he said, wreaking havoc for the sake of itself.

Not knowing what else to do, Percy turned around and went home. He felt so confused, angry, and frustrated that he needed to be by himself for a while. Whatever errand he had needed to run could wait until another day.

Meanwhile, Lydia was assisting her father at her home to pack up his medical kit for a call he was attending. Lydia felt quite at home in her father's surgery and knew his tools almost as well as he did. “If she's exhibiting generalized nausea, tenderness in her chest and weight gain, do you not think that Miss Derry might not be suffering from a tapeworm but rather ...”

“She may very well be with child,” her father said, sighing. Rodrick was not a stranger to going and visiting young women who were attempting to hide unwanted pregnancies from their families. Because he was a kind man, Rodrick would always turn a blind eye in front of the family and diagnose the young woman with some other, less disruptive illness so that her relatives would stop pestering her. And

then, he would usually call Lydia in from the carriage so that the young woman might have a chance to tell someone who she knew she could trust what really happened and how she came to be in this state.

“Another one of these cases is it?” Lydia asked, closing up her father’s case and handing it to him.

“Unfortunately,” Rodrick said disappointedly. “The number of times I have had to call upon your mother to reach out to her friends in other towns to see if they could take care of these young women in difficult situations is rather remarkable. If there were a way I could give these young women something they could take or use to prevent pregnancy, I would do so in a heartbeat. I find it appalling that they should have to ruin their lives to bring up a child they never wanted in the first place.”

Lydia put a comforting hand on her father’s shoulder and said, “Someday there will be, but not while you or I are living. And so we must go and do the best that we can, Papa.”

Having had that difficult discussion, Lydia and Rodrick climbed into their carriage that was practically falling apart and rode to Miss Eliza Derry’s home on Bletchfield Lane. Lydia did not know Miss Eliza well, but she knew of her enough to know that she was a kind young woman who didn’t deserve to be suffering from pregnancy. The father and daughter rode in silence until they arrived. Rodrick gave his daughter an encouraging smile as he disembarked from the carriage and said, “I don’t think I shall be very long. I will call upon you when I can get Miss Derry into a room by herself.”

Lydia nodded to him, and then Dr Seymour went inside the home. Lydia was about to pull out the needlework she had brought with her to pass the time while her father was speaking with the family when she spotted someone outside of the carriage she wished to greet.

“Edmund!” she called delightedly out of the carriage door, and at first, when he saw her, he looked quite vexed. However, after a moment, he seemed to realize who Lydia was, and he looked far happier to see her.

“Miss Seymour,” he said happily, “how wonderful it is to see you. I was actually just about to come to your home to see if you would like to take a walk with me ... but now that you are here, perhaps we could partake in one right here?”

Lydia was about to accept, but something held her back. If it had been Percy who had shown up on this street in town and asked to go for a walk with her, she would have accepted him instantly. But there was still something about Edmund that made her feel somewhat ... uneasy.

And yet, she had no real reason to feel that way. He had been so kind to her at those balls and parties, and he had only told her the gossip that he had heard about her, he hadn't spread that rumour himself. So why was she feeling this way? Whatever the feeling was, she knew better than to ignore it, and so she decided to decline him.

“I'm sorry,” she said, trying to sound as regretful as she could, “but I believe that my father is going to call me in to assist him with a part of his medical examination in a few minutes, and so I will have to wait out here. But we could speak like this if that is pleasing to you.”

Edmund looked disappointed, but he accepted Lydia's terms. “Of course,” he said graciously, “I can imagine that you are a great help to your father, and I wouldn't dream of taking you away from assisting him. I would be very happy to speak with you out here.”

And so, Lydia descended from the carriage, and she and Edmund spoke for another short while. Lydia ensured that they were positioned so that anyone on the street could see her, and so her reputation would not be questioned even though she was unchaperoned.

“You enjoy steamed fish?!” Lydia cried at one point, laughing. “I cannot believe that. I think that has to be one of the vilest dishes that are served at gatherings.”

Edmund smiled and chuckled, kicking a stone in the street with his shoe. “I am sorry to disappoint your taste buds, Miss Seymour, but I am afraid that I am telling the truth. If there is that variety of fish being served at any function I attend, then I always go straight for it. This does work out well, however, for the next time that we go to a ball together, you can put any steamed fish that you are served onto my plate!”

Lydia began laughing again but then stopped herself. “Sorry, did you say the next time that we attend a ball *together*?” she asked him carefully. “As in ...”

As Lydia watched him, Edmund began going red in the face. “You have caught me out, Miss Seymour. I must tell you that I would very much like to continue to court you and ... and see how things come together.”

Lydia’s heart jumped into her throat. *See how things come together?! As in ... marriage?! her thoughts screamed in her head. Goodness! I hadn’t expected this to come out so soon ... but perhaps that is because I have become accustomed to the pace that Percy takes things. Which, I’m afraid, is a snail’s pace.*

Lydia was trying desperately to come up with some sort of answer that would evade Edmund's comment, for she did not know if she should accept his offer. Thankfully, however, at that moment, Dr Seymour appeared out of the side door of the house.

"Lydia, my dear," he called to her, "we're ready for you."

Rodrick looked briefly at Edmund, and the two men gave each other nods of acknowledgement. Lydia quickly bid farewell to Edmund and went inside the house. When her father closed the door after her, he said, "I have left Miss Derry in the kitchen. Her father and mother wanted to have a discussion with me about how best to treat her 'intolerance for certain foods'."

Dr Seymour gave his daughter a knowing wink and then went inside the sitting room. Lydia opened the door to the kitchen and saw Eliza sitting at the table, looking very sorry for herself.

"Good afternoon, Miss Derry," Lydia said gently and politely. "How are you ..."

But the moment that Eliza saw her, she looked furious. "*You*," she said with venom in her voice. "Get out. I will not speak to you, and you will not stay in my family's home for a moment longer!"

Lydia froze. "I ... I'm sorry, Miss Derry, did I do something to offend you?" she asked her, blindsided by Eliza's reaction.

Eliza scoffed and crossed her arms in front of her. “If you do not already know, then it is not my job to inform you. Good day, Miss Seymour. I hope the door hits you with great force as you leave my home, you putrid waste of space.”

Lydia could hardly believe her ears, but she was so taken aback that she didn't know what to say in response. And so, she simply curtsied respectfully to Eliza and then went and waited for her father in the carriage.

While she waited, she tried desperately to think of a reason why Eliza would have been cross with her. She had only met her a handful of times, and there was nothing in their interactions that Lydia could think would have made her that angry. She tried to think of the relations that she and Eliza shared and could come up with not a single one. *Why ... why on earth would she have spoken to me in that way?* Lydia wondered to herself. *She seemed to think I was the scum of the earth!*

When her father came back into the carriage, he said, “How was she?” When Lydia recounted what had happened, Rodrick did not sound surprised. “I was afraid of that, and I am sorry that you had to endure her wrath, my dear. She seemed upset with me from the moment I entered. I'm afraid she must be far more upset with her state that we previously thought, and has decided to take her anger out on us.”

Rodrick began taking them home, but Lydia couldn't help wondering if he was actually right. There had been something about the way that Eliza had spoken directly to Lydia that made her believe that it was her who she was really mad at. And though she already had a great deal on her mind, Lydia made a mental note to get to the bottom of whatever was upsetting Miss Derry.

Chapter 18

A week later, it was time for another gathering. Lydia didn't realize how many parties and balls there were to attend in a season, but it seemed to her that this season was an especially popular one. But this time around, Lydia was expecting something – she knew that tonight was going to decide whether she would be with Edmund or Percy.

If Percy hadn't got up the nerve to request to court her formally, then Lydia knew she was destined to be with Edmund. However, if Percy did make the formal request, she knew that she would be absolutely over the moon with happiness and could spend the rest of her days happily loving him.

Lydia hoped in her heart of hearts for the second option to come true, for she still was not sure about Edmund's character. However, she knew that he had strong feelings for her and was unafraid of showing them outwardly, and so if Edmund was the only man brave enough to be with her, then so be it.

Upon arriving at the ball with Marianne and their respective chaperones, Lydia began looking around for Percy. She dragged Marianne along with her, and as soon as she did, Marianne knew what was happening.

"You don't have to pull me so hard," Marianne told her, "as I am happy to follow you around the ballroom. I know that you are looking for Percy, and so I intend to follow you any way you'll have me!"

Lydia let go of her friend's hand. She hadn't realized how tightly she had been squeezing it, but when Lydia let go, she felt all of the blood rushing back into her hand. She knew she was nervous but hadn't realized that she was *that* nervous.

"Sorry," Lydia said curtly. "I'm ... distracted."

Marianne laughed. "You think I cannot tell that? Oh, my dear ..."
Marianne gave her a loving pat on the shoulder, but when her eyes fell on someone standing just behind Lydia, her heart began pounding. She thought that she could tell by Marianne's smile who it was, and so she turned around fully expecting to see Percy standing behind her. She knew that he would proudly tell her that he would ask her parents to court her, and then they could begin the rest of their lives together as quickly as possible.

However, it was not Percy. It was Edmund, standing there with a wide grin on his face and holding two drinks in his hand. "Good evening, ladies," he greeted them, trying to bow as best as he could without spilling the drinks. Lydia was so disappointed she could hardly think straight, but she did her best not to show it on her face.

"Good evening, Your Grace!" Marianne warmly greeted him. "How lovely to see you here. Is one of those drinks for me?"

Edmund looked horribly embarrassed until he realized that Marianne was joking. Then, an easy smile came across his face, and he offered one of the drinks to Lydia. "Would you like one?" he asked.

"What is it?" she enquired.

“Punch!” he answered happily. “But I believe it may have been ...”

Lydia took the drink and downed it in one gulp in front of Marianne and Edmund. She truthfully didn't care what was in it; all that mattered was that it had alcohol. She figured she might need a bit of liquid courage tonight.

When the drink hit her taste buds, however, she wanted to gag. It was a horrible mixture of a variety of things, none of which were pleasant. But she didn't let on to either of the people before her that she hadn't enjoyed it.

Edmund looked stunned, and Marianne looked impressed. “Would you like to dance with me, Edmund?” Lydia asked, boldly using his first name in public.

Now, Edmund was even more flabbergasted. “Ah ... yes, very much indeed, Lydia,” he stumbled through his response.

Lydia gave Marianne a quick wave goodbye and then disappeared into the crowd with Edmund. They found their positions in the dance just as it was about to begin, and then they looked at each other, smiled, and the dance started.

The pair were far better-matched dancers this time. It seemed something had changed in their mannerisms, and neither of them was as awkward or uncomfortable as the first time they had danced. It was reassuring to Lydia, and she hoped that their relationship would evolve in the same way.

“Well then,” Lydia began, shouting over the music to be heard and breathing heavily as she tried her best to keep up with the dance, “was there something that you wished to speak with me about?”

Edmund nodded. “There certainly was. I am not sure that this is the correct place to do it, however, as ...”

“No matter,” Lydia interrupted him. “There is no better time than the present, is there?”

Edmund gave her a tight, uncomfortable smile, and Lydia’s heart sunk. She thought that he hadn’t wanted to speak to her here because he was going to propose to her right then and there. But there seemed to be something else bothering him.

“In that case,” Edmund said, missing a step as he tried to focus on what he had to say, “I should tell you that I am not all that happy. I’ve heard from many people that you have been spending a great deal of time with the Duke of Wexley. I should tell you that I have no problem with the two of you being friends, but I ... I thought ... well, I suppose I should ask you first where we stand.”

Lydia froze. Not literally, of course, as it would have thrown off the rest of the dance. But in her mind, her thoughts had turned to icicles, and her mind was now frozen shut. She felt as though she had been caught, and that Edmund was now scolding her for having spent that time with Percy, even though she and Edmund had not come to any sort of an agreement.

“Where we stand?” Lydia clarified, her voice hollow and emotionless. *What a fool I am, Lydia thought. This truly was a terrible idea to have*

this discussion on the dance floor.

But then, Lydia thought about the mortifying experience that this conversation would have been if they had just been having it face-to-face off in a corner somewhere. At least here, Lydia could pause for dance breaks as they kept up with the quick moves.

“Yes,” Edmund said sternly. “I believe that I have made my feelings quite clear to you, Lydia. I have shown you affection; I have enjoyed our conversations, and I have even come to call upon you. If there was ever any doubt in your mind that I felt romantically attached to you ... I shall say right now that I admire you deeply and believe that you and I are destined to spend the rest of our lives together.”

This time, Lydia quite literally froze, and three women bumped into her, causing rather a big scene. However, Edmund quickly swept her out of the dance and took her over to the side of the ballroom where they could speak uninterrupted.

“Lydia,” Edmund said seriously, “I want to marry you. Full stop and period. But I cannot ask for your hand if I am not completely certain that you will not continue your relationship with the Duke of Wexley. It is not that I do not trust you, it is that if you are continually seen with him, I’m afraid others in society might get the wrong idea.”

Lydia’s head was swimming. The room was stiflingly hot with all of the bodies in motion inside of it, the music rang loudly in her ears, Edmund was staring at her expectantly with his promises of marriage and spending the rest of their lives together, and to top it all off, the drink that she had chugged down was not sitting well in her stomach.

She knew that she had to make a hasty exit, but she couldn’t do that

without giving Edmund an answer. And so, she took a deep breath, looked him in the eyes ... and then paused.

Her heart was breaking. She knew that she needed to do what was right for her future and her family, and right now, the only man who seemed to be taking a relationship with her seriously was Edmund. Percy had many chances to tell Lydia that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her, or to speak with either of their parents about the possibility of marriage.

And yet, he hadn't. Time and time again, he had delayed doing anything except making advances at Lydia. While she had enjoyed them immensely and treasured the time she had spent with him even more ... he had not done what was necessary to be with her. He had failed her in almost every way possible, and so standing there in front of Edmund, she knew that she had to say yes to his proposal. But in her heart of hearts, she knew the man she really wanted to be with was Percy.

And so finally, Lydia's brain melted enough that she could speak again, and she simply responded, "Yes."

It took a few seconds for Edmund to realize what she was saying yes to. "Are ... are you telling me ..." Edmund stuttered.

"Yes," Lydia confirmed for him. "I am going to marry you, Edmund Russell, and I will put an end to my relationship with Percy Wentworth tonight. You have my word."

Having said her piece and still feeling sick to her stomach, Lydia gave Edmund the quickest of pecks on the cheek and then ran outside to get some fresh air. She desperately hoped that Edmund wouldn't

follow her, and for a moment, she thought he hadn't.

She leaned into the bushes and emptied the putrid contents of her stomach. When she was finished being sick, she could finally feel the cool night air upon her skin, hear the gentle music quieting down in her ears and smell the flowers that were dangling right in front of her.

But then, to her dismay, she heard the door to the ballroom open behind her, and someone walked outside onto the patio. She presumed it was Edmund, and so she called to him, "I am so sorry for leaving you like that. I was just feeling so overwhelmed by everything, and ..."

When Lydia turned around, however, she saw that for the second time that night, she had been wrong about the man who was standing behind her. It was Percy, and he looked so concerned she thought that he was going to pull her into an embrace and hold her for as long as she wanted him to. Or maybe, that was what she was hoping was going to happen.

"Lydia, what happened?" he asked, his voice shaking with worry. "Were you ill? Would you like me to take you home?"

But all Lydia could do at that moment was brush off his comments and sit on the bench far away from where she had been ill. Percy, of course, came and sat beside her and began rubbing her back gently.

"There, there," he whispered softly. She knew that he was trying to comfort her and make her feel better, but all his kindness was doing was making her feel far, far worse. "Have you had anything to eat tonight? Can I get you something?"

Lydia shook her head but still couldn't say anything. She knew that she needed to tell Percy what had happened with Edmund, but she didn't know if her heart could take it. She needed to end things once and for all if she was going to have a chance at staying with Edmund, but her nerves were getting the better of her ... as was her love for Percy. She couldn't say it just yet.

"I ... I just got feeling a little too warm inside," she said quietly. "I could do with some water, though."

Percy nodded wordlessly and disappeared back inside the ballroom. Lydia took a moment to breathe and shut her eyes, but when she heard the door open again, she came out of her trance. Percy looked so endearing standing there holding the glass of water that it made her want to forget about Edmund entirely.

Percy came and sat down beside her again, placing the glass in her hand and saying, "I won't let you say another word until you've drunk this whole glass. And," he pulled his hand out from behind his back and produced a few sweets, "eaten these."

Lydia couldn't help smiling. She obeyed Percy and thirstily gulped down the glass of water. She hadn't realized that it had been such a long time since she'd had a drink that wasn't alcohol, and that probably contributed to her awful feeling a great deal. When she'd finished the water, she hungrily ate the sweets and then smiled at Percy.

"There," she said happily, "are you satisfied that I have obeyed your conditions, doctor?"

Percy chuckled. "You've been the easiest patient I've ever had."

Percy leaned in towards her and planted a soft kiss upon her lips. Lydia didn't even try to fight it because she wanted it, and by extension, him, so very, very badly. After they had gently kissed for a moment, Percy pulled back.

"I'm afraid that we might be a bit too ... public in our advances right here, Lydia," he whispered. "If I laid out my jacket on the grass, might we ..."

"Yes," Lydia said hastily, and the couple joined hands and dashed behind a tree a little distance away.

Percy laid out his jacket as he said he would, and Lydia lay down on it. When he lay down on top of her, her mind was free from worry or concern about what she needed to tell him, and all she could focus on was him.

Percy started out just by kissing her gently, and his lips felt so soft and inviting that Lydia never wanted to part from them. His tongue slipped between her lips a few times, and she found herself gently biting his in return. She started breathing heavier and could feel herself getting wetter by the moment.

But Percy wasn't making any moves beyond that, and for that, Lydia was grateful. She assumed that he was moving slowly because he thought she still wasn't feeling well, and so to let him know that she was fine, she ran her hand down the front of his body and started stroking him on the outside of his pants. When she felt him getting harder, she pushed him off of her playfully and clambered on top of

him.

Percy looked so surprised and aroused that he didn't say a word. Lydia shifted her skirts so that she was pressed right up against his throbbing member. When she did, he closed his eyes and opened his mouth, letting out a quiet moan.

Lydia leaned forwards and started kissing Percy's neck. She could taste the perspiration that had collected where his neck met his shoulder, and when she nibbled his ear, he put his hands on her lower back and dug his fingers into her. Lydia chuckled, her voice low and sultry, and then began kissing down the front of his chest.

When she did this, she heard Percy's breathing getting even faster. "Yes, please," he moaned, and so she put her hand down again and started stroking him. He was now rock hard, and every aroused nerve ending in Lydia's body told her that she should tear off his pants and sink him deep inside her. Even though she was letting her mind be blank and just enjoy what was happening between her and Percy for the time being, she knew this was a terrible, terrible idea. But that only made her want to do it more.

Finally, Lydia thought that she'd made a decision and so she pulled down his pants. When he was completely exposed to her, Lydia's eyes widened as she remembered how big he was. In fact, he was so well-endowed that she worried that he might make intercourse painful for her. She moved past that, however, and was about to get on top of him and put him inside of her when Percy stopped her.

"Wait. Were you going to allow me to ... insert myself into you?" he asked.

Lydia nodded. "I've wanted this for so long, and I want you so badly right now," she whispered. However, she did not make any more moves while Percy was talking.

"But Lydia," he reminded her, "I haven't even asked my mother or your parents to formally court you yet. I don't think this is a good idea."

That was all it took to shake Lydia from her blissful amorous time with Percy. The reality of the situation that she was in came crashing back down around her, and she pulled away from him quickly. Percy pulled his pants back up, and Lydia rearranged her dress.

"You still haven't said anything to anyone about me?!" she cried, suddenly furious. "When we spoke about it the last time, you made it sound like you were going to take charge and handle that. But now you're telling me that you still haven't made any moves to be with me?"

Percy looked shocked. "Lydia, I never promised you that I was going to request to court you yet," he said defensively. "I thought that we were just speaking about our relationship in general terms; how was I to know that you were expecting that?"

Lydia glared at Percy. "Because even if we didn't say that you would make the move to court me by the next time that we were together, we've been partaking in enough amorous activities together that courting is the next logical step! We've had so many conversations about ourselves and our lives and our affection for each other too, so how could I not expect you to want to court me as quickly as you could? You said yourself that your mother would understand whoever you wanted to marry, as long as it was the person who made you the happiest in the world. Don't speak to me as though I am the villain in this situation for wanting to be shown affection publicly; *that is what is*

meant to happen between two people in love!”

When Lydia said the last part of her sentence, she began shouting at Percy. She was so angry and hurt that after all this time they'd shared together, he still wasn't brave enough to want to be with her.

“Is the fact that I am not of your class really so important to you that you won't admit your feelings for me to your parents as well as mine?” she asked him. “I had thought that by now, our feelings were mutually understood to be strong enough for each other that it was time for you to court me. And yet you have failed me again! You've made me feel used, Percy. We've kissed and touched and done so much more than that because I thought that you and I were headed in the direction of marriage. But if you're telling me that you *still* have not made arrangements to court me, then you're no better than Arthur Middleton! It is no wonder he took in Georgiana because you're so much like him that when she met him, he felt like a familiar friend!”

Lydia knew that she had enraged Percy the moment those words were out of her mouth. But it was the truth. “How dare you say that,” Percy growled. “I am nothing like Arthur; I have never once promised you anything in return for what we have done together. I thought that we were moving at our own pace and that eventually ...”

“Eventually, what, Percy?” Lydia demanded. “You'd forget about me and run off with some other society woman who was of a better breed than I? You're making it sound like you were a saint for never promising to marry me when you were seducing me, but that only makes it worse and makes me feel even more foolish for having fallen for it! I cannot take this anymore; I don't ever wish to see you again. I am marrying Edmund. He has told me he is going to propose, and I have accepted him.”

Although Percy was still furious, his face crumbled. “What? You're ...

you're going to marry Edmund?"

"Yes," Lydia responded firmly. "Edmund is not ashamed to be with me, unlike you. He has properly courted me and publicly asked to be with me. He shall be calling on my father this week to ask for permission to marry me, and my father will be only too happy to accept him. When he proposes to me, I shall say yes, and you will never hear from me again. Goodbye, Percy."

Lydia turned on her heel and started walking back towards the ballroom, but Percy ran after her.

"Lydia, wait, wait!" he cried, but Lydia did not stop walking. Finally, Percy caught up with her and grabbed her arm, turning her around to face him.

"I never thought that you would go this far with Edmund," he informed her. "I ... I'm sorry for what I said back there; I didn't mean any of it. I'm in love with you, Lydia Seymour, and you simply cannot marry someone else."

Lydia froze. For a moment, she did not know how to react. But then, she exploded with anger.

"You love me *now*?!" she screamed at him. "And you're telling me that I cannot marry the only man who has outwardly said he wants to be with me up until this moment? You are a selfish, cowardly fool who has done wrong by me over and over and over! Why, if you love me, have you always pulled me away from the crowd and into a private room to be with me? Why haven't you spoken with my parents about being with me if your love is so overpowering? Why have you made me feel like I am not worthy of your love?" Lydia looked at Percy

expectantly, but he didn't reply. "Answer me!"

"Because I am a coward," Percy admitted. "I've wanted to be with you since the first day I laid eyes on you, Lydia. But I've always held back because ... because I was scared."

"This is exactly what I'm talking about," Lydia replied, her eyes narrowing. "You're afraid to be with me, and so that's why you've never taken charge of our relationship. And I cannot be with someone who is ashamed to be seen with me."

"I'm not ashamed to be seen with you, that isn't it at all," Percy responded. "In fact, I would be proud to enter a room with you by my side. Lydia, you're the most remarkable woman I've ever met. You're smart, funny, sharp, and generously kind. I can't imagine the rest of my life without you, so would you please just stop this nonsense with Edmund? I know that you feel the same way I do, so how can you marry a man that you do not love?"

"People do that all the time, Percy," she informed him. "Not everyone can be with the one they love. Especially if that person has treated them with nothing but disrespect."

With that, Lydia fled from Percy, tears streaming down her face as she ran back to the ballroom. She vowed never to see him again if she could avoid it, and as she opened the door to go back into the house, she felt the door closing on their relationship.

Chapter 19

Later on that night, Percy sat in his study, furious and heartbroken. He couldn't accept the possibility that he might lose Lydia at all, let alone to a horrible man like Edmund Russell. But even more so, he couldn't believe that he'd let his own insecurities get the better of him. It was because of them that he was about to lose the love of his life.

Why couldn't you have just asked Mama to court her? You know that after some discussion, she would have accepted Lydia, and then you wouldn't be in this situation at all! But instead, you had to shield your own feelings because you were afraid of getting hurt, just like you always are. You're a coward, and if you lose Lydia to Edmund, you'll spend the rest of your life regretting it.

Percy was about to collect his things and brood in his room for a while before trying to sleep when the door to the study creaked open.

"Percy?" Georgiana called, and when she saw him inside, she gave him a gentle smile. "Why'd you leave the party so early? Didn't you want to follow me around and ruin all my chances at marriage?"

He chuckled despite his stormy mood. "I thought I'd done enough of that at the last few gatherings."

Georgiana strode to the front of his desk and took a seat at the chair across from him. She was still dressed in her ball gown, which tonight was an emerald green with a black lace overlay. Percy had not seen a dress with a black overlay before, but Georgiana was a woman ahead

of her time. He was very proud of her, despite her rebellious spirit.

“Tell me what’s wrong,” she ordered. “I won’t leave this room until you let me know what it is that’s bothering you.”

Percy sighed and sat down in his desk chair. “It is very foolish, and I am very embarrassed about it, so I don’t know if I feel like sharing it with you.”

Georgiana smirked. “All the more reason to share it with me, brother dear. I promise that I’ll be kinder than I usually am when it comes to these sorts of things, and I won’t tell a soul.”

Percy fidgeted in his seat, really not wanting to reveal the silly reason why he was upset to his little sister, but he knew he had little choice in the matter. Georgiana was going to ferret it out of him anyway, so it was probably smarter just to tell her.

“It’s Lydia,” he said quietly, playing with a button on his suit jacket. “I’ve gone and royally ruined everything with her. I hadn’t asked her parents to court her yet, and ...”

“You *still* didn’t ask to formally court her?!” Georgiana cried, incensed. “Did you at least inform Mama of your desire to be with her?”

Percy shook his head. “As I said, I was very foolish. Lydia and I have had so many wonderful moments alone, but I still couldn’t get out of my own head enough to realize that I had to make the next move if I wanted her to stay with me. And then ... she got fed up. She’s told me that she’s going to marry Edmund Russell and that she never wants to

see me again because of my treatment of her.”

Georgiana stared at him, dumbfounded. “Percy, I was going to go easy on you because I thought that you deserved some sympathy ... but it appears you don’t. You’re an idiot. Don’t you realize that Lydia is the best thing that will ever happen to you? I’ve spent hardly any time with her, but I already feel closer to her than most of my close friends, and so I’m not going to let you mess things up with her anymore. I am going to help you to win her back.”

Percy rolled his eyes. “You have better things to do than that, Georgiana. Don’t waste your time helping a sad old man go after a woman who he ruined everything with. You’re far too busy making time in your schedule for Arthur to court you, aren’t you?”

Georgiana laughed out loud and idly played with a strand of her scarlet hair that had come down from her hairstyle. “Arthur? No, no, I was only trying to play him to get revenge for what he did to Poppy Carthew.”

“What?” Percy asked, stunned. “I thought that you had fallen under his spell, just like every other girl?”

Georgiana shook her head. “Absolutely not. It was the other way around; I was trying to get Arthur to fall for me to humiliate him. I was done with hearing of him taking advantage of young women, and so I decided to have my own fun with him.”

Percy leaned forwards and put his hands on the desk. “Georgiana ... you’re brilliant.”

“Thank you, but I already knew that,” she said happily, grinning at him. “I finished with him weeks ago, though.”

However, as soon as those words were out of her mouth, Georgiana looked as though she had said something wrong. At the same time, Percy realized something. “Wait ... then if you weren’t spending time with Arthur the past few weeks at balls and dinners ... who were you with?”

Georgiana shifted in her seat, uncomfortably. “I was spending time with my friends. I saw different ones at each ball, so that’s why I ...”

“No,” Percy interrupted her, “I remember you saying before a few of the balls that you were disappointed none of your friends would be there. And once when I returned from being with Lydia, you had gone off with someone. Who was it?”

Now, Georgiana looked even unhappier. “I do not have to share the intimate details of my life with you, brother.” Georgiana rose from her seat and started leaving the room. “I am allowed to see whomever I please, and ...”

Percy ran to block her from leaving the room. “Georgiana, why are you running from this simple question? Is it someone worse than Arthur? That cannot be possible.”

Georgiana tried to get around her brother, but he kept stopping her. Finally, she exploded at him. “*Percy!* I do not owe you the knowledge of who I was seeing, and I demand that you let me leave this room this moment! You are not Mama, and so you cannot make me tell you who I was seeing.”

“Georgiana,” Percy said calmly, “I am only asking you to tell me because I care about you so deeply. I am not asking you to be your overbearing big brother. I just love you so much that if any man were ever to hurt you, I would never forgive myself.”

It seemed that Percy’s calm had overpowered Georgiana’s fury, and she finally released her anger. She stood stock still in front of her brother.

“It’s not that I didn’t want to tell you because I thought you were being overbearing,” she told him. “It’s because the knowledge would upset you, and I don’t believe our relationship would ever be the same again.”

Percy shook his head. “Whoever it is that you are seeing, we will work through it, I promise.”

Georgiana still didn’t look convinced, but finally, she sighed. “Fine. I have been seeing Lewis. It is Lewis who has been courting me, and Mama gave him permission. I was trying to find the right time to tell you ...”

“*Lewis?!* ” Percy roared. “My best friend requested permission to court you, and neither you, him, nor Mama told me? How could you?”

Georgiana looked like she was going to cry. “Percy, please, you don’t understand. We didn’t want to tell you because we were afraid you would react just like this! But Lewis loves me, and he’s the kindest man I’ve ever met. I hope that in time you come to understand our

relationship and won't feel as betrayed by our actions."

Right on cue, the door to the study opened, and Lewis walked in. As soon as Percy saw him, he flew to him in a fury. "*You're courting my sister?*" he screamed at him, grabbing his collar and shaking him.

"Percy!" Lewis cried, his eyes filled with fear. "You have to understand, my intentions with Georgiana have been nothing but honourable since the start. She is the most ..."

"*I don't want to hear it!*" Percy screamed in his face. "Not only were you courting Georgiana, but you did so without consulting or informing me. You have both betrayed me; the two people who I trusted the most in the world."

"Percy, please," Lewis begged him, grabbing his friend's hands with his own to stop him shaking him. "I am in love with Georgiana, and the only reason why we didn't tell you was that it wasn't the right time. We wanted to be able to sit you down and explain everything to you ..."

"And yet you asked my mother's permission to court her before you did that?" Percy asked.

"Yes," Lewis responded, "because I found myself falling so quickly for Georgiana that I did not want to make a social faux pas and not have your mother's permission before we proceeded."

"Percy, we did this because we thought that we were protecting you," Georgiana explained. "You've been so protective of me since Papa

died that I knew you would be upset. But we thought that if we approached you at the right time, then you might understand why we wanted to be together. We had hoped that you might even be happy to see the two people you loved most in the world falling in love.” Georgiana looked to Lewis with such adoration in her eyes that it made Percy want to be sick.

“Happy for you?” he asked, shocked. “Why would I be happy for you? The mere fact that you are together is a betrayal to me.”

“Why is it a betrayal?” Georgiana countered him. “Why are you not happy that I have found a good, honourable man who wants to be with me? You were always telling me to find myself a man who was worthy of me ... and I believe Lewis is that person.”

“Absolutely not,” Percy shut her down. “Lewis, you are never to step foot inside this house again, and if I ever see the two of you speaking, I shall make sure that you never live to see another day.”

“*Percy*,” Georgiana scolded him, “you are acting like a petulant child, and I forbid it. You have to understand that we made all of these decisions with your best interest in mind.”

“Wait,” Percy interrupted her, “if Lewis has been formally courting you, then that means that the rest of society is aware of your love as well, aren’t they?”

Lewis slowly nodded, and Percy’s world came crashing down around him. He had been so caught up with Lydia that he hadn’t even taken notice that everyone around him knew something that he didn’t. He was mortified. Not knowing what else to do, he released Lewis from his grip and stormed out of the room.

“Percy, wait!” he heard Georgiana and Lewis calling after him, but he did not turn around. In one evening, he had lost the woman he loved, his sister, and his best friend. He didn’t know if he was ever going to recover from this.

Chapter 20

The day after Percy's world fell apart, he did not leave his room. He knew that was a very juvenile thing to do, but he didn't care. He was going to allow himself one day to be petulant and childish about the whole situation, and then he was going to try and figure out what to do.

He spent much of his time that day poring over some of his old favourite books. He always found that when he was in distress, the best thing to do for himself was to get lost in a good book. He also found that if he read about characters who were experiencing trials similar to his and saw how they reacted to them, it inspired him to be a better person. Literature was his comfort, his inspiration, and his boon companion.

He first read some of his favourite poems from Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and a translation of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect* by Robert Burns. Poetry was another way in which Percy buoyed his spirits as he found it to move his soul in a way that no other style of writing could. But there was still something that was missing from what Percy was reading, and so next he turned to plays.

There was a new play that had recently been published called *The Belle's Stratagem* by Hannah Cowley. He discovered that the piece was about a young man who was engaged to be married to a young woman who he hadn't seen since they were both very young. Although he was not repulsed by her when they met again, she was not the vivacious young woman she had been when she was younger, and he was disappointed to be marrying her.

As Percy read, he began to recall a memory that he thought he had long forgotten. He recalled a gathering when he was much younger, and at this get-together, his parents introduced him to a great many people. He couldn't remember most of them, but as the play he was reading mentioned the two main characters meeting when they were younger, he suddenly recalled seeing Lydia that night so many years before.

When he thought of her standing there in the crowd as a young girl, his heart skipped a beat. He couldn't believe that he had seen her before the night he'd thought they'd first met when they quite literally bumped into each other.

Do you think Lydia remembered who you were when she was re-introduced to you recently?

In the book, Letitia Hardy, the main heroine, had fallen madly in love with Doricourt, the main hero, long before Doricourt returned her feelings. Percy then wondered if Lydia had very much remembered who he was her whole life, and had already fallen for him before they re-met, as Letitia had for Doricourt in the book.

Could it be possible that she had recalled your introduction as children many times throughout her life? What if she had been just waiting to meet you because she was already madly in love with you? And now ... you've ruined everything for both of you by not realizing your true feelings for her soon enough and being too cowardly to take the steps necessary to court her!

Percy threw the play across the room and began pacing. His plan of brooding in his room the whole day was quickly proving to be a more difficult task than he'd thought.

Perhaps I shall take a walk to rid myself of these guilty feelings. Then I shall return to my room where I can be as upset as I please, and no one can tell me otherwise.

Percy put on his outdoor jacket, sneaked out of his room, and went down the back stairs. When he'd made it outside without anyone seeing him, he breathed a sigh of relief. He was in one of those moods where he knew if anyone was to ask him how he was doing, he would just explode. While he knew it would have felt amazing to do that, he didn't want to unleash his miserable mood onto anyone else.

He decided to take the long way around the gardens, weaving in and out of the plants as though it was a maze. When he reached the edge of the woods surrounding the estate, he decided to go through them, as they were not a very popular walking spot for anyone in his family.

However, when he reached a clearing a short distance into the woods, he stumbled upon Georgiana and Lewis sitting on a log, having an intimate conversation. His initial instinct was to come out of the bushes and disrupt their time together, but he thought better than to do that. Instead, he decided to hide himself and listen in on their conversation.

"This is not fair at all," he heard Georgiana saying. "He's told me my whole life to find a good man who is worthy of my love, but now that I have, he's furious that it is you! How could I have chosen anyone better than a man who he already knows and trusts because he is his best friend?"

Percy peeked out from behind the tree covering him and saw Lewis reach out and take Georgiana's hand.

“We just have to give it time, Georgie,” Lewis said gently, rubbing the back of her wrist. “He did not find out about our relationship in the ideal way that we’d hoped ...”

“Which was his own fault,” Georgiana interrupted him.

“... and so he’s going to need the time to come around to the idea of us. There isn’t a doubt in my mind that he’ll accept our decision to be together, and I know that his reaction yesterday was just because we caught him by surprise,” Lewis finished

Percy was touched to hear that even though he had behaved so poorly towards Lewis, he still thought the best of him.

“But why did he have to react so ... violently? Even though he was taken by surprise, I would have thought that he would have been happy for the two of us. How could he not be? You’re a far better alternative to Arthur Middleton.”

Percy heard Lewis laugh at that comment. “‘A Better Alternative to Arthur Middleton’, that will be my catchphrase from now on.”

“Oh come on, Lewis, you know what I meant,” Georgiana replied, laughing at herself.

“Yes, yes,” Lewis responded, “but I think Percy may have been so upset because of what happened between him and Lydia Seymour. You heard that she’s marrying Edmund Russell, didn’t you?”

“That’s what started the whole conversation he and I had yesterday,” Georgiana informed him. “And I think you’re right; he was utterly devastated by Lydia choosing Edmund over him.”

“Can you blame him? I would go mad if I discovered you chose another man over me,” Percy heard Lewis say tenderly. “I am the luckiest fool ever to live because I have you, Georgiana Wentworth.”

Percy heard the adoration in Lewis’ voice and was pleasantly surprised. Lewis tended to be a bit of a ladies’ man, but there was something about how he was talking to Georgiana that told Percy that his friend was very serious about his love for only her.

“Oh, stop that romantic mush right this instant,” Georgiana tossed back at him lovingly.

Percy decided he’d heard enough. He still wasn’t entirely comfortable with his best friend courting his younger sister, but he knew they were right for each other. He just needed to talk to Lewis about taking things slowly, as Georgiana was still an impressionable young woman and deserved the chance to grow and mature before she was married.

He retreated to the house, feeling far less foggy-headed than he had when he set out. He decided against retreating to his room immediately, instead going to his study for a bit of a change of scenery. It felt good not to just be cooped up in his darkened room, and he found that being surrounded by his work actually aided him a great deal.

About fifteen minutes later, there was a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Percy called to the person, now feeling far more ready to see people.

The door opened, and to his surprise, Lewis entered slowly. “Good afternoon, chap. Can I enter without fearing for the state of my shirt collar?”

Percy chuckled. “Yes, yes, that was yesterday’s nonsense, come sit.”

Lewis still walked rather hesitantly towards his best friend but did take the seat in front of Percy’s desk. When he sat, he fidgeted for a few seconds, and Percy figured he was unsure of how to start the conversation that needed to happen between the two of them. He decided to be kind to his friend and try to start the conversation himself, but then they both started speaking simultaneously.

“Percy, I’m very sorry ...”

“Lewis, I need to explain my behaviour ...”

When they both stopped talking, they chuckled, and Percy said, “You first.”

“I’m very sorry for sneaking around behind your back as we did. We should have told you from the start, but because we didn’t, I very much understand why you felt betrayed. I hope that in time you’ll

come to realize the depth of my affection for Georgiana, and know that all of my intentions with her are honourable,” Lewis expressed in a heartfelt manner.

Percy was quiet for a moment, taking in what Lewis had said. “Now that I have had time to process your relationship, I must tell you that I take back all of the horrid things I said about you and Georgiana, and I am very sorry. I still need some time to come to terms with it ...”

“And you have every right to take whatever time you need, my friend,” Lewis interrupted. “I also want you to know that I am not planning on rushing things with Georgiana. Although I already know that I love her more than I ever will any other woman, I know that she still needs time and space. I intend giving her whatever she needs, and if it turns out that we are not meant to be together later, then I shall just have to accept that.”

Percy was taken aback. He had already been impressed by the mature way in which Lewis spoke with Georgiana, but now that he was telling him exactly what he wanted to hear in regards to his sister, he could hardly believe it.

“My God, man,” he said, taking his best friend’s hand and shaking it. “I don’t believe you could have impressed me any more if you’d tried.”

Lewis let out a great sigh of relief. “Thank goodness. I was absolutely terrified that this conversation would end with you throwing me out of this house and telling me never to show my face here again!”

The two men laughed, and Percy felt so much more comfortable with the idea of Lewis and Georgiana courting.

“To tell you the truth,” Percy told him, “I’m quite relieved that Georgiana will have you to keep her out of trouble from now on. Best of luck with that!”

Lewis started laughing again, but then stopped abruptly. “She isn’t ... that hard to keep out of trouble, is she?”

Percy shrugged and was just about to answer when the door to the study opened again. Georgiana poked her head in and said, “Has the storm passed? Is it safe for me to come in?”

“Don’t be silly; yes it has,” Percy replied, and Georgiana skipped happily into the room and came to stand beside Lewis’ chair.

“Good!” Georgiana exclaimed. “If you hadn’t accepted our love, then I was going to threaten to go back to taunting you with Arthur!”

All three of them laughed, and then Lewis said, “One other thing I felt I needed to bring up with you was that Lydia Seymour is set to be engaged to Edmund Russell any day now ... were you aware of this?”

Percy nodded sadly. “Unfortunately, yes. But I don’t know if there is much I can do about that.”

He leaned back in his chair, feeling very sorry for himself and looking rather pathetic. But that didn’t last long, as Georgiana and Lewis quickly began encouraging him.

“Brother,” Georgiana began, “I know that you may not have fully recovered from the shock of our relationship, but I must tell you that you are being utterly ridiculous.”

Percy looked at his sister, indignantly. “I most certainly am not. I am being realistic about the situation, and know that there is almost nothing I could do to ...”

“There is so much you could do!” Georgiana shouted at him. “As I said before, Lydia is the best thing that is ever going to happen to you. If you let her go and marry Edmund Russell, then I shall never forgive you.”

“I’m afraid I must agree with Georgiana, Percy,” Lewis replied. “Miss Seymour is a truly remarkable young woman, and all that you have to do to be with her is ask your mother for permission to court her, and then ask her parents the same thing. I cannot promise that your mother will agree to it, but I know that asking her will be worth it, and you will regret it if you don’t!”

“Are ... are you sure?” Percy asked them hesitantly. “Do you think I really have a hope with Lydia if I act now?”

They both nodded emphatically.

“You must act before he proposes to her!” Georgiana cried. “Go and speak with Mama right this minute, and then take the carriage to Lydia’s house and profess your love for her!”

Georgiana and Lewis were nodding at him as though this was a great idea, but Percy was feeling a little overwhelmed. “Slow down, shouldn’t I wait until ...”

“NO!” they both cried in unison.

“Waiting too long was what got you into this mess in the first place!” Georgiana cried. “Lydia should not have to wait a moment longer for you, go now, go now!”

They both practically shoved Percy out of the door of his study, and so he set off down the hall to the sitting room where his mother was. He was more nervous than he had been in his whole life, but it felt good because he knew he was doing the right thing. He was going to win back the love of his life.

Chapter 21

Lydia, her father Rodrick, and her mother Vivian were seated in the dining room, just about to begin their meal that mother and daughter had worked on together most of the afternoon. It was Rodrick's birthday, after all, so there needed to be a special meal for such an auspicious occasion.

"This all looks simply magnificent, thank you, ladies," Rodrick said gratefully.

Lydia looked around the table and saw all that they had prepared. There were roasted potatoes, a turkey, squash, homemade bread, gravy, and much more. She was exhausted after having done all of the meal preparation with her mother, but she was even more emotionally exhausted after having ended things with Percy the day before.

She was feeling anxious about the next few days and the engagement set to come from Edmund any time now. She knew that she had made the right decision, though, as Percy was obviously never going to be smart enough to be proud to be publicly seen with her.

"Our pleasure," Vivian said graciously. "You can give much of your thanks to Lydia, as she did much of the labour for this evening's meal. I know that with her talent in the kitchen, in addition to many other positive qualities, she will make a fine match someday soon."

Her mother winked at her, and Lydia felt the butterflies that had disappeared from her stomach for a moment reappear. But she did her

best to smile back at her mother, as she knew that she would be waiting for that reaction.

Lydia was just about to respond to her parents when she heard a sharp rapping on the front door. She looked from her mother to her father and said, "Are we expecting any guests this evening?"

Rodrick and Vivian both shook their heads. "Not that I am aware of," her father informed her. "Unless we have an emergency patient, in which case ..."

Lydia sighed. She was not unaccustomed to all of their celebrations being interrupted by her father's job, but that didn't make it any less disappointing. However, she quickly rose from her chair and went to the front door to see who needed help.

Her heart nearly stopped when she pulled it open and saw Percy standing in front of her. "Good evening, Lydia," he said, sounding quite out of breath. "Might I possibly intrude upon your evening? I promise that my business is most urgent and that it will please you to hear it ... I hope."

Lydia nodded wordlessly, still in shock, and opened the door so that Percy could come in. When her parents saw him enter, they both reflexively stood up. "Good evening, Lord Wentworth," Rodrick greeted him, dabbing his mouth with his napkin. "Is someone in your household in need of immediate medical assistance?"

"Oh no, nothing of that sort, my apologies for concerning you, sir," Percy reassured Rodrick. "No, my business here this evening is of a more ... personal nature. You see, sir, I have come to ask for your permission to marry your daughter."

Lydia's eyes opened so wide that she thought they might fall right out of her head. "M ... Marriage?" she sputtered, looking from Percy to her parents and back again.

"Goodness, my boy," Rodrick said, looking as shocked as his daughter. "This is a rather surprising announcement, is it not?"

Percy shook his head. "It isn't to me, sir, but I well understand why it would be to you. You see, Lydia and I have spent time together at the last few gatherings and balls, but before tonight, I was too afraid of my own feelings to ask for your permission to be with Lydia. However, I have come here this evening after having realized that Lydia is, by far, the most magnificent woman I have ever met, and so I have decided to embrace this fear that I had been feeling before and take a chance on my heart."

Percy was looking right at Lydia the whole time he was saying the parts about her, and she felt herself being swept away by his words. She did not, however, allow herself to get so caught up in his romantic words that she forgot what he had done to her. She kept that in the back of her mind as a reminder.

"I ... I just don't know what to say," Rodrick said, continuing to look utterly baffled. "Lydia? What do you have to say about all of this?"

Her father looked to her, but she was still as speechless as he was. Percy, however, interjected for her.

"I was wondering if I might have a private word with Lydia so that

she might have a better understanding of what has transpired since we last saw each other, as we had a disagreement that I would like to clear up,” Percy explained.

“By all means,” Rodrick told him, gesturing to the other side of the room. Percy gently steered Lydia in that direction, and then they spoke to each other in hushed tones. Lydia knew that her parents had to remain in the room for the sake of propriety, but she very much wished that they would just disappear into the next room for a few moments.

“Lydia,” Percy began, “I need first to tell you that I am so terribly sorry about all of the misery I caused you. I knew from the moment I met you that you were someone special and that I wanted to spend time with you forever. But my own foolish insecurities and worries about my sister held me back from being with you in public. I now realize that I treated you very cruelly and can see exactly how I made you feel as though I was leading you on. I have been told many times in the past that I can be cold and aloof ... and it seems that I acted like that around you too. I know that my apology doesn’t do much, but I needed to apologize anyway.”

“And now that I’ve said that,” Percy continued, “I wanted to tell you that of course, I’ll understand if you still wish to be with Edmund. I know that I do not deserve your forgiveness, and I did not come here today expecting it. But I also needed to tell you that I love you and that I want to be with you. I’ve told my mother about you, and although she sees society in a very different way than I do ... she has agreed to let me follow my heart. And Lydia, my heart has led me directly to you. I love you, and I want to spend the rest of my life proving to you that I might one day be worthy of your love.”

Lydia said nothing for a few seconds. She needed time to process everything coming to her so quickly, and what a change this was from what he’d said two days ago! She considered what he had said and thought about how he had hit upon all of the things in their

relationship that had hurt and bothered her. But then she also thought about how deeply he had scarred her by treating her the way he had. She thought for a moment that she didn't know what to do ... but the truth was, her heart knew exactly what she wanted.

Lydia flung her arms around Percy and embraced him as tightly as she could. "I love you too, Percy Wentworth, and thank you for working through all of that and accepting responsibility for your actions. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, too, so we'd better go over there and ask my father for permission!"

They both laughed quietly and then turned back to Rodrick and Vivian, who were still looking utterly baffled. "Doctor and Mrs Seymour," Percy began, "I know that this is all very sudden, but I know that I can provide the best life possible for your daughter. I love her more than words can describe, and I will strive to make her feel as special as I know she is every single day. Might I have your blessing to marry her?"

Lydia looked expectantly to her parents, and although this was all very sudden, she hoped they would understand why she wanted to be with Percy.

Rodrick, however, did not look impressed. "Lord Wentworth, you have unfortunately come to request my permission for Lydia's hand at an inopportune time. Edmund Russell has already come to ask for my blessing, and while I have not given it to him as of yet, I do intend to the next time that he comes to the house."

Percy, however, just smiled back at the good doctor. "That is perfect, then. If you have not yet given him your permission, then you could give it to me instead, as I know that I can give Lydia a far better life than Edmund Russell."

Rodrick raised an eyebrow at him, turned to Lydia, and said, "Darling, could I have a private word with you?" Lydia nodded, and they went into the next room, leaving Vivian to speak with Percy for a few moments.

When they had shut the door, Rodrick looked to his daughter. "Well, what do you think about all of this, Lyddie?" he asked with a slight smile on his face. "This has been quite a development in all of this, and although I was ready to give Edmund my blessing, I see no reason why it should not go to Lord Wentworth instead. Who do you wish to marry?"

While Lydia felt completely overwhelmed by all of these new developments, she knew immediately who she wanted to be with. "Percy," she said with certainty. "I have wanted to be with Percy from the very beginning, but before tonight, he did not have the courage to be seen with me publicly. But I believe him when he says that he has overcome that fear, and I know that he loves me with all his heart. To tell you the truth, I was only considering Edmund's offer because he was giving me the stability and reliability that Percy was not. Even throughout these trials with Percy, I never stopped loving him. I simply thought that he did not want to be with me because I was of a lower class."

Rodrick looked at her quizzically. "And what has changed so drastically in two days that he is suddenly ready not only to court you publicly, but go straight ahead to marrying you?"

Lydia laughed. "I do not believe much has really changed at all," she confided in him. "I believe that Percy wanted to be with me this whole time, but as he said, his fear about his feelings for me was holding him back. But now that he has accepted how he feels, I know that he is ready to be with me. I have never felt more confident about anything in my life."

Rodrick shrugged, but then pulled Lydia into a tight hug. “If you say that you will be happy with this man, then I know that you will, my brilliant girl. You are so sure of yourself and your decisions that I know this one will be an excellent choice.”

They broke apart, and Lydia felt so happy that she was sure her heart was going to burst. They returned to the other room, and Rodrick addressed Percy.

“Lord Wentworth,” he said seriously, as Percy looked at him with fear in his eyes. Lydia desperately wanted to comfort him and tell him that everything was fine ... but there was also one tiny, tiny part of her that was enjoying watching him squirm. It was a small payback for what he had done to her as they were establishing their relationship. “After having spoken with my daughter, I wanted to ensure that you understood the grief that you caused her. Do you know that she thought you didn’t want to be with her because of her class?”

Percy nodded, embarrassed. “Yes, I’m unfortunately quite aware of that, sir, and I cannot express to you how guilty I feel about that. My problem was that I was so caught up in my head with my duties surrounding my sister as well as what was expected of me by society that I couldn’t bear the thought of ruining the natural chemistry that Lydia and I had with official announcements and such. I can now see that my own fears and aloofness made me almost ruin the one chance I had with the woman I am in love with. And for that, I am eternally sorry.”

Tears welled up in Lydia’s eyes, and she whispered, “I forgive you,” to Percy.

Upon hearing that, Rodrick clapped his hands and made everyone in the room jump about a foot in the air. “Well!” he said, looking joyous. “It seems that we have another cause for celebration with this meal, for I do believe that Lord Wentworth and Lydia just became engaged!”

Lydia ran to Percy and embraced him while her parents proudly looked on. Lydia couldn’t believe that her dream of being with Percy had come true after all, and she was now looking forward to getting to spend the rest of her life with him.

And then Lydia ran to her mother and father and hugged them both tightly as well. “Oh, thank you, Mama, thank you, Papa!” she cried, so happy that she could hardly speak. When she finished embracing them, Percy and Rodrick shook hands, and Vivian planted two kisses on her soon-to-be son-in-law’s cheeks. Percy beamed at Lydia as they sat down at the table together, and the couple held hands throughout dinner.

The discussion of the wedding began at that very meal, and Percy and Lydia couldn’t wait to begin their lives together. If they had been given the option, they would have tied the knot that very night. But as they did not wish to rush things, they chose a date a month from now and were very pleased with it indeed.

As the night drew to a close, Lydia looked over at Percy at one point when they had moved to the sitting room, and she was moved to tears by the thought of how lucky she was. To think that she was going to marry the man who she had spent so long hoping to be with as a child was beyond her wildest dreams.

And what made it even better was the fact that Percy had evolved into such a considerate, loving, and wonderful young man, who Lydia knew was worthy of her love. At that moment, she didn’t care what the future held for them; as long as they were together, she knew they

could handle anything. They were, after all, a match made in heaven.

THE END

*Can't get enough of Lydia and Percy? Then make sure to check out the
[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...*

*What kind of shocking news will Rodrick share with Lydia about the man
who was about to be her husband?*

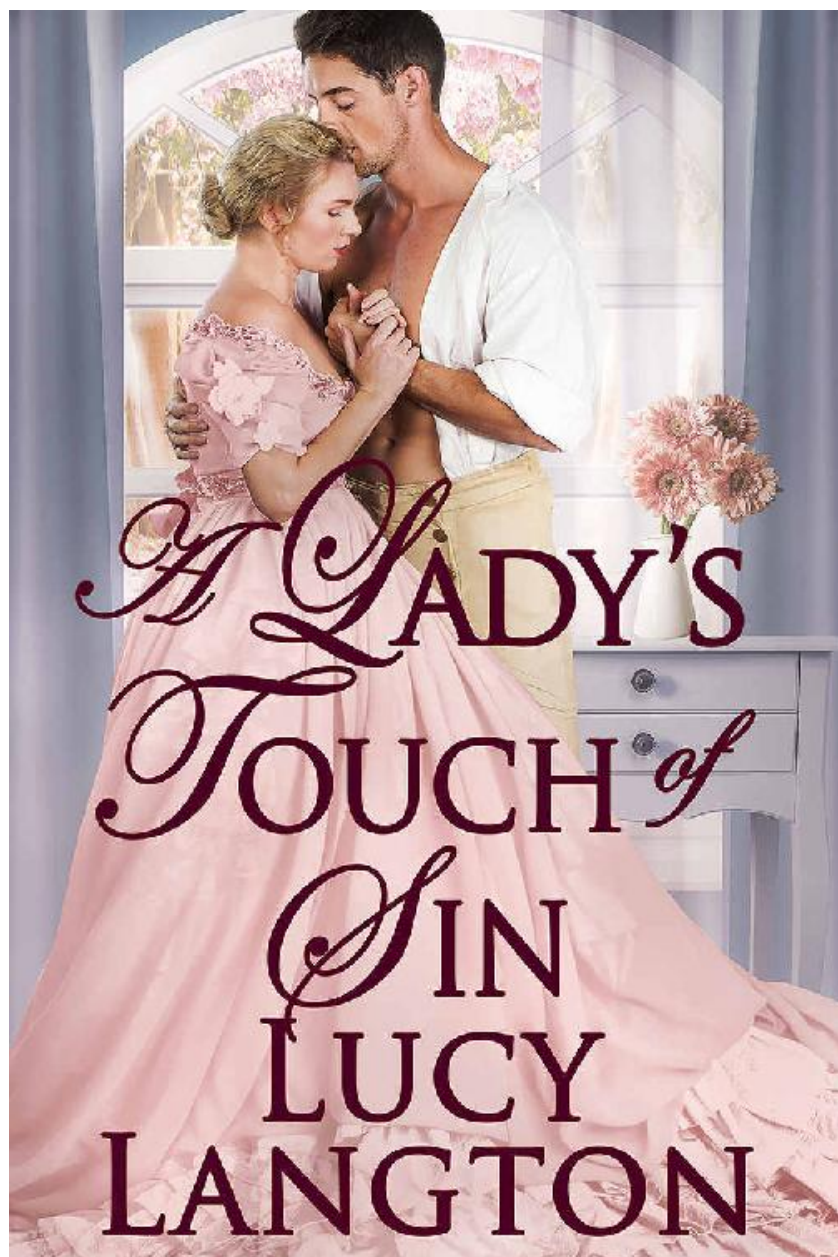
*In what unexpected way are Lydia, Georgiana and Marianna planning to
revenge Edmund?*

*What kind of inappropriate thoughts will Lydia share with Percy that will
make her cheeks blush?*

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://lucylangton.com/lydia>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first
chapters from “A Lady's Touch of Sin”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



A Lady's Touch of Sin

Introduction

When her mother finds out that she was involved in a frantic love triangle, Marta Schnitzler is instantly being cast from her Austrian home. What awaits her is her Aunt Margaret, a tittering woman with an earnest responsibility to find Marta a match, against her wishes. While the blue-eyed beauty desperately tries to escape from her future misery, a very dashing man shows up in her life, but, to her misfortune, he is not the one her Aunt has chosen for her. But when her Aunt insists so much on a particular engagement with a Duke, should she just give up to the tantalizing stranger she just met or should she fight to satisfy the burning passion she holds for him?

Baldwin Terrence is a successful businessman and the future heir to his ducal estate. When his best friend's cousin comes unexpectedly to visit, he finds himself surprisingly stricken by her stunning eyes, and the connection between them is electrifying. Her beauty is irresistible and tests his willpower at every turn. She's everything Baldwin is not: a spitfire, compassionate, apt to dream and gossip and live loudly and grandly. Of course, she catches the eye of nearly every important member of society, including the dastardly Duke, Lewis Remington. The only thing he knows is that he is determined to possess her, at any cost. Will he convince her that the haven she's longed for all her life may be lying in his arms?

Thus begins a tale of lust and heartache, full of passionate moments. But soon their burning promises are all they have left. Caught between her past and her future, Marta must decide whether she's willing to let go of the life she knew for a love she never thought she would find. But in the end, is the choice actually hers to make? Torn between her Aunt's will and what she desires, she has to choose between the man who sets her heart on fire and the one she despises. But can this undeniable desire between them really be buried? Will their love prove strong enough to shatter every obstacle in their way?

Chapter 1

Blonde-haired. Blue-eyed. A woman who'd grown up in the shadow of the gorgeous Alps, attuned to the layered and humble culture of the Austrians. She'd never been one to demand anything else. "In every way, you're an Austrian girl, aren't you?" was how her mother phrased it, with a twinge of doubt to her voice.

"You've raised me an Austrian girl," Marta returned each time, genuinely fearful that her mother looked at her—her half-English, half-Austrian daughter, and considered her a mistake. Perhaps she longed for a full-fledged English daughter, a daughter with a better English accent, and a more proper approach to the concepts of courting and love.

Throughout the previous months, Marta had certainly proven herself to be much more like an Austrian girl than her mother wished for.

Marta Schnitzler was nearly 19 years old, which meant her mother, Evelyn Schnitzler, had journeyed to Austria to marry her father nearly 20 years before. Throughout those early years, Marta had lived a stunning, sun-speckled life. But there was always a strange shadow behind that life: the shadow of England, the country her mother had left behind and seemed to miss so desperately.

Throughout Marta's childhood, she'd demanded of her mother only twice: why had she left her beloved home? Her mother spoke of England with such poetry and nostalgia that it made even Marta's heart ache. Her mother had said something off-handed about her duty to Marta's father and left it at that. "It was a different time," she said eternally, as though that was some sort of bandage over everything else.

Marta had journeyed to England before age nineteen only a few times: at ages four, eight, and twelve. Now, as her mother verbalized to her that she would embark on a journey and remain in England throughout the next courting season, Marta was left only with the images of her twelve-year-old trip.

She felt sure it had rained the entire time; the grey clouds above had pressed onto their heads in a formidable fashion, and the accents had been difficult to decipher from county to county, as they'd visited her mother's various friends and cousins. She glanced up at the gorgeous, white-capped Alps and felt a surging pain in her stomach.

"Mother. You can't think that I'll just leave my beautiful Austria all spring and summer long," she whispered. "You cannot rip me from something I hold so dear. All my friends and my..."

"Yes, your lovers," her mother said, a note of sarcasm in her voice. "Of course, I wish you to leave your lovers. You've created quite a mess of it all, darling Marta. I can see it on you. You're a shadow of your former self. Moping about the house, your heart aching." Her mother sniffed and lifted her chin, as though she sensed the power of her words and wanted to allow them to sting another moment more.

Tears collected in Marta's eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She, too, lifted her chin toward her darker-haired mother, a mother who looked very little like her. When they'd walked down the street together years prior, people had stopped them and asked their relation, as they didn't seem to be mother and daughter. This had cut Marta's mother to the core. "She's my daughter," she'd insisted, in broken German. "Through and through."

This was another factor that had altered their relationship over the

previous few years. It seemed that Marta's mother could never master the German language, no matter how often she studied. She'd grown increasingly disheartened about it. When they were in public, Marta ordinarily had to take over the conversation and speak for her mother, who grew aggressively red-faced and normally screeched at Marta afterwards. "I could have handled that myself."

But Marta had grown up speaking both languages. She felt both sides of her personality as two separate countries. And her mother had pinpointed the Austrian side as the reason for her adventurous nature, the reason she'd fallen into such a strange and sinister love-triangle.

Indeed, her heart felt as though it had been dropped deep underwater. It beat slowly, strained, aching and heavy from all the madness she'd created. It was all her fault. She knew that.

"An entire season in England will be good for you," her mother continued. They sat in the breakfast nook area with a full view of the mountains. She poured them both another spot of tea and rearranged the shortbread cookies atop the platter between them. The platter, to contrast the tea and English biscuits, had been painted in the Austrian fashion. Here it was, on full display: another contrast between England and Austria.

"Do you suppose?" Marta asked. She moved her biscuit across her plate, unsure if she'd ever be hungry again.

"I do. You remember my sister and her son, Ewan, don't you?"

"Aunt Margaret. Of course," Marta returned, remembering the finicky woman, approximately the same age as her mother, who'd insisted that she didn't run too swiftly with the boys through the forest and

moors, as it wasn't "ladylike." At this, her mother had told her sister that Marta ran around like a ruffian through Austrian hills. "It just chills me, wondering what sort of woman she'll grow into," she'd said.

These weren't the sorts of things women like Marta could easily forget. She supposed that one never truly forgot the little, strange insults one's mother cast toward them throughout their early youth. One's mother was one's very first audience—and if applause wasn't heard, what sort of creature had one become?

"You've spoken with Aunt Margaret about this, then?" Marta asked. Her throat felt as though it might seal off, disallow her breath.

"Yes," her mother returned. "She's entirely thrilled with the idea. Already speaking about the sorts of matches she wishes to procure. She's quite the meddling woman, of course—always has been. I remember when we were first courting, she had her finger in everyone's business. If only I had listened to her when she'd told me who to link myself with, perhaps I wouldn't..."

Here, she paused once more and drew her eyes again towards the biscuits. This seemed to be where the two of them chose to look throughout this strange and alienating conversation. Eye contact wasn't much of an option.

"Perhaps you wouldn't have moved to Austria to be with Father? Perhaps you wouldn't have had me?" Marta said, a hint of annoyance in her tone.

She'd felt the words flow from deep in the belly of her mother. She'd resisted them and now resisted asserting that those had been her thoughts. Her mother cleared her throat, shifted in her chair, and then

blurted, “You’ll leave in three days’ time.”

This was far too sudden. Marta tore up from her chair and blinked at her mother, aghast. At nineteen years old, she could hardly envision travelling such a distance alone.

“You’ll take Laura with you,” her mother said then, as though this was enough of a gift.

“So, Laura must be forced to abandon her family and friends also?” Marta asked. She sizzled with volatility.

“You can tell her to remain here if you’d like to go on alone,” her mother said, sounding flippant, now. “It’s really up to you. I’ve informed her of the journey, and she seems rather pleased. Excited, even. The prospect of a new country, a new life... Why wouldn’t a young maid like that wish for adventure?”

Her mother placed a dry biscuit across her tongue and slowly chewed it, studying Marta’s face with beady eyes. Marta’s heart leapt into her throat and then floated back down again. She felt aching resentment for what her mother planned to do: rip her away from this wild situation she’d crafted.

But in truth, as minutes ticked on, she did recognise this as an opportunity to become something else, something better.

And, if nothing, talk of her departure would ripple through her Austrian town and make her sound even more exciting: certainly not the sort of woman you didn’t choose over another.

At this thought, she, too, dropped her eyes to the biscuits and chewed softly on her lower lip. “Three days to say goodbye to Austria,” she whispered, marveling at the thought.

“Make sure you say ‘auf Wiedersehen’ to as many of these chubby-cheeked Austrians as you can,” her mother said coldly, utilizing a wretched Austrian accent.

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When Marta arrived back in her bedroom, she found her maid, Laura, awaiting her. In German, she cried, “Darling Marta! Your mother has informed me of the adventure we’re to embark upon.”

Oh, how dreadful that her mother could be correct about so many things. Marta curved her own smile between her cheeks and nodded. “I suppose it’s the sort of thing I can’t get out of now. Not with my Aunt Margaret lying in wait for me, waiting endlessly to suit me up with some lacklustre Englishman.”

“Oh, but aren’t they endlessly attractive, the Englishmen?” Laura asked. She batted her eyelashes swiftly.

“Laura, I can’t imagine they’ll be anything too exciting. Aren’t they meant to be rather stuffy, rather boring?” Marta returned. She perched on the edge of her bed and gazed out again at the mountains, her heart surging with panic.

"I'm rather sick of Austrian men," Laura returned. "Not that your mother has given me much time to myself for such matters."

"I understand that," Marta murmured, resolving herself to give Laura as much time as she required off to truly experience this strange "English" existence to its full potential.

"Oh, but I'm rather worried about my English," Laura continued. "It's entirely lacklustre, and I know it will get me into heaps of trouble."

"Perhaps I can teach you a bit on the way," Marta offered. "It's a very long, very arduous journey. We'll need something to keep our minds preoccupied."

Laura chatted on for a long while about her suspicions of the way of life in England. Marta continued to gaze outside. Dread seemed to envelope her. When she finally cast her eyes back toward Laura, Laura placed her hand on her heart and swept toward Marta.

"Darling, I've known you for years and years, and I've never seen you looking so tremendously..."

"Oh, it's just this heartache," Marta stuttered. "Part of the reason my mother wishes to send me away. I feel as though everything I've ever known and loved, everything I've ever dreamed of, is about to be taken away from me."

"You've looked so stricken over the past weeks," Laura admitted. "I haven't drudged up the courage to ask."

“You must have heard the gossip about the market,” Marta said, her voice heavy. “I’m widely known as the loser in a love triangle; the woman left behind. I know my mother wishes to shield me from such wretched labelling. But in truth, I believe that heartache is so powerful that it will follow me across the continent, all the way to that tiny island she loves so dearly. I cannot understand it, Laura. If she loves England so much, why doesn’t she return? Her love for my father seems lacklustre in comparison.”

“Your mother, leave your father? She would never operate so outside the bounds of societal expectation,” Laura returned.

“I suppose. But why would she remain so miserable throughout the rest of her life?” Marta considered. “She looks at these beautiful mountains—these incredible gifts from God himself—and doesn’t feel a thing. I know it because I can see the coldness in her eyes. She sees this next step in my life, this journey to England, to be a necessary and mathematical one. She cannot fathom the depths of my soul.”

“But didn’t she come to Austria in the first place because of some sort of wild belief that your father was her dearest and only love?” Laura asked. She said it sneakily, as though she wanted to remind Marta of just how similar she and her mother truthfully were.

Of course, Marta yearned to reject this concept. She sniffed and said, “I really don’t need anything else from you today, lovely Laura. Please, take the rest of the time for yourself. I can begin to pack myself. I know it’s nothing an English girl would do, but it’s what I feel I must do to prepare myself.”

After Laura left, Marta lay back on her bed and felt her heart drum up

a reckless beat in her chest. She felt her best-laid plans shrivel up and die, right before her eyes. All the while, the man she'd fallen for, the man she'd given her heart to, was assuredly off with this other, beautiful, entirely-Austrian woman, a woman who'd beaten Marta in every single manner, in heart and soul and beauty.

Marta clutched the fabric of her bed's blanket hard so that her fingers lost their colour. She sighed, recognising the severity of her anger, and slowly unclenched.

England. It was to be a fresh life. The sort of one that would allow her to make up her story as she pleased. Just then, her story in Austria had been cut short.

But there would be other things. Other events. She was Marta Schnitzler, and she lived only within the bounds of her own adventurous reality. Regardless of her mother's "sentence," she would embark on this journey with her eyes open to the possibility of it.

Perhaps that was how she could best her mother: to prove to her that she didn't need anything but the wild imagination of her own mind.

Chapter 2

Three days later, Marta and Laura sat together in the coach en route to England. Laura seemed skittish as the coach embarked from the station in Vienna. She nearly glued her nose to the window to peer out and wave manically at her brother, who'd arrived with her to see her off. Marta had already bid adieu to her mother and father at their estate, which had left her little to do while Laura and her brother Max had carried on before the coach's arrival.

It devastated her to admit that she wished for the sort of love Max and Laura had between them. Her mother hadn't been able to have other children after her; there had been something wrong during the birth. Sometimes, Marta wondered if this was another reason that her mother demonised her. She wasn't only her Austrian baby; she was further the only one she'd been allowed to have.

Throughout the journey to England, the train passed through Germany, with its rolling green hills and beautiful lakes and The Black Forest. As they cut through the border, Laura looked, aghast, and said, "There's another country between Germany and England?"

At this, Marta laughed and said, "Of course! This is Belgium."

"Belgium," Laura murmured, rolling the name around on her tongue. "I can't imagine a more beautiful word."

"Nothing is more beautiful than the word Austria. We must remember that forever," Marta affirmed.

But Laura didn't seem as keen on keeping her roots close to her heart. Rather, throughout the coach ride, she threw herself completely into her English lessons: reciting various terms by heart as they ripped through Belgium and laughing at some of the other phrases Marta taught her, such as, "By the by," and, "Wouldn't you like to?" which, she said, sounded terribly ridiculous from a purely rhythmic perspective.

"You'll take to England in no time at all," Marta said, genuinely pleased at her ability to teach. It kept her mind off the love she left behind, off the mother who seemed to despise her, and off the future that stretched before her, one she felt she needed to carve out for herself.

Here on the coach, it was just her and Laura and various verbs and phrases and nouns, along with mounds of whatever coach food items they purchased, including various sweets and biscuits and little packets of cheese.

When they neared England itself, the clouds that had lived in Marta's memory of England brewed up overhead, thick and formidable. On instinct, Laura reached for her jacket and flung it around her shoulders. Enormous raindrops splattered across the window, and Laura again lurched toward it to peer at the bright green flatlands, the fields that seemed almost moss-like, the trees that told a far different story than the ones back in Austria. They seemed oddly sinister.

"What was it like when you came here years ago?" Laura asked. Her voice was a bit strained, as though she suddenly wished to collect as much information about her surroundings as possible before the coach gave birth to them in this strange land.

“It was a family visit, mostly,” Marta said, her brow furrowed. “I met with my cousin Ewan, who is a few years older than I. I suppose now he’d be about twenty-four? So a good five years older than I. The previous time, I was twelve, and he was seventeen. I tried to keep up with him and his dear friend—oh, what was his name?—in the surrounding woods. But it was clear that I was an outsider. My Aunt Margaret scolded me and then scolded my mother. I remember distinctly she asked my mother if she really let me run about so wildly back in Austria. My mother looked stricken. Yet again, I’d disappointed her.”

“You mustn’t think of it like that,” Laura said. Her eyes glowed with innocence. “She really loves you. She must just imagine the sort of life she might have had if she’d remained in England and feel a bit regretful of it...”

“Regretful of me, her only daughter,” Marta said. Her lower lip bobbed around a bit. “Well, in any case. I won’t see her for quite some time, will I? Perhaps the next time she sees me, she’ll know me as a proper English lady. The sort of woman she’d be glad to call her daughter.”

**

At the coach station, Aunt Margaret, Uncle Everett, and Ewan greeted them. It took a long moment, truthfully, for Marta to recognise their faces. After all, it had been seven years since her last visit.

“Darling!” Aunt Margaret called, the moment she reached the trio. She was much shorter than Marta remembered, with stooped shoulders and several chins and wild, greying hair. Of course, as she was quite wealthy, she’d dressed excellently for this trek to the coach station. “You look every bit the Austrian girl your mother said she’d raised.”

Marta wasn't entirely sure what sort of compliment that was, or if it could even be deemed as one. "Hello, Auntie," she said, surprising herself with how thick her English accent was in this sort of company. "Uncle Everett. And you must be Ewan." She flashed a large smile at her handsome, broad-shouldered cousin. "I suppose you don't remember me."

Ewan's grin widened. There was a big gap between his two front teeth, one Marta didn't remember from their youth. "Of course I remember you. Not everyone has a cousin from Austria. It's made me quite the talk of the county."

Aunt Margaret rolled her eyes. Her wrinkled hand clutched Marta's wrist as she said, "He's really wretched, Marta, I do hope you won't be overwhelmed with annoyance. You'll grow accustomed to him as the season goes on; I promise you." She then gave a funny wink, which warmed Marta through her belly and up through her heart.

The good-natured greeting gave Marta a small morsel of hope. Her smile stretched wider. Suddenly, she remembered herself.

"Oh, of course. Allow me to introduce my dear friend and handmaid, Laura Arbinger. She's been a marvellous help throughout the journey already."

"Good afternoon!" Aunt Margaret said, her voice falling into a bit of a screech.

There was a strange pause. A look of emptiness folded over Laura's

face.

“I’m terribly sorry. She doesn’t speak much English yet,” Marta said.

“Oh! Good afternoon!” Laura said suddenly, in English. Then, she turned swiftly back towards Marta and muttered in quick German, “I’m terribly sorry. I thought I would recognise English much quicker, but their accents are bizarre, aren’t they? Much different than yours.”

“That’s so pleasant to hear! I haven’t heard the German language in many years,” Uncle Everett said. It was difficult to tell if his words were layered with sarcasm.

Laura gave Marta another confused look. Marta forced her smile and said, “It’s been a terribly long journey. Do you think we could...”

“Of course,” Aunt Margaret blurted. “Silly us. Here. We’ve brought one of our stable hands to collect your suitcases. Jeffrey!”

A muscular man in his mid-30s leapt out from behind them and grabbed several suitcases, which one of the coach hands had set in a line behind Laura and Marta. Laura nearly leapt from her stance. This was surely the first time someone had actually waited on her, rather than the other way around.

**

Aunt Margaret, Uncle Everett, and cousin Ewan lived on a grand

estate approximately a half-hour outside Central London, a county that allowed for the snooty response that one was “from” London, without any of the inner-city chaos.

As they rode, Aunt Margaret explained what had befallen her eldest daughter, Tatiana. The memory of Tatiana was brief in Marta’s mind. She was perhaps twenty or twenty-one at the time of Marta’s most previous visit, which meant that she was now twenty-seven or twenty-eight.

“She married when she was twenty-three, which was altogether appropriate,” Aunt Margaret recited, speaking as though some people had suggested Tatiana had married a bit too late for their or society’s liking.

“Who did she marry?” Marta asked. This was the sort of thing her mother would have liked her to ask.

“She married an earl, in fact!” Aunt Margaret said, altogether pleased with the question. “It was one of the more beautiful weddings I’ve ever attended. She’s a petite little thing, our Tatiana, and her earl towered over her throughout the ceremony. Their courting was quite swift. I remember I matched them in May, and by August, the engagement was set.” She beamed at Marta.

“So you’re a bit of a matchmaker,” Marta said, remembering what her mother had said about the upcoming courting season.

“Oh, it’s just precisely what I dream to be,” Aunt Margaret said. She seemed to glow with excitement. “I already have such a strategy for you, my darling niece. The niece from Austria! With all the beauty of the east and the Alps, and all the culture of England. You’ll do very

nicely, I believe.”

Marta didn't exactly enjoy this seeming comparison to things that were oft-traded, like cattle. But she forced her smile wider, reminding herself that this was her first day in a long string of days. She couldn't very well draw herself obstinately out of the gate.

Obstinate cattle, out of the gate. The thought of it made her chuckle.

“What's that, darling?” Aunt Margaret asked. Her eyebrow shot high on her forehead.

“Oh, nothing, Aunt Margaret. I'm simply pleased to be back in England. It's been far too long.”

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The carriage clucked along, through the picturesque village with its gorgeous old-world church, its steeple a bit crooked toward the sky, over cobblestones and mud roads and then all the way to the Thompson Estate, a place that rippled with Marta's memories. As she stepped from the carriage, she felt as though she floated through a dream she'd had continually over the years.

Perhaps on cue, due to some sort of act by God himself, the clouds parted over the large stone mansion and cast sunlight across it. The golden light reflected off the windows and across Laura's gorgeous face. Laura looked as though she'd never seen anything more beautiful in her life.

"It's entirely different to the mansions in Austria," she said, her eyes like saucers. "I've never seen anything like it."

"What did she say?" Aunt Margaret asked.

"She really loves your mansion," Marta said. "It's quite different from back home in Austria."

Aunt Margaret lifted her eyebrows. "My! I cannot imagine what it's like. I've seen the occasional painting before, of course, but lately, the way your mother has described it in letters..." She shook her head, seemingly disinterested.

The stablehand carried their suitcases into the mansion ahead of them. At the door, a bald-headed butler pulled open the door and bowed low.

"Good afternoon," he said. "Welcome to the Thompson Estate."

They stepped into the elaborate foyer, lined with gorgeous old-world paintings of Marta's relatives and Uncle Everett's, as well. Everyone in the paintings looked rather forlorn and aghast and sallow, as though they'd lived very hard lives and had only paused for a brief moment to have their paintings done. Again, Laura seemed incredulous at anyone opening the door for her. She leaned again towards Marta's ear and muttered, "They must know that I'm a servant, correct?"

"It doesn't matter. We're guests just now," she returned.

“So much German in this house!” Aunt Margaret said. This time, it seemed clear that she didn’t welcome it.

This caused a memory to flicker up in Marta’s mind. Years before, when she’d been a twelve-year-old visitor, her mother had forbidden her from speaking any German. This had been a bizarre time, as her mind flicked between English and German, and she wasn’t always clear which word would fly from her mouth on-command. Her mother’s watchful eyes and ears had caused her to snap her lips shut more than once, seconds before she uttered something auf Deutsch.

“Mother, they’ve only just arrived,” Ewan said. His words were reproachful, as though he understood precisely the sort of pressure Marta was under. He gestured out toward the hallway, which seemed to lead back towards the garden outside. “The clouds have cleared. Would you like to meet in the garden after you freshen up? I imagine dinner will be served rather soon.”

“We’re terribly hungry,” Marta said good-naturedly.

“Hungry,” Laura repeated, in English.

“Let me show you to your rooms,” the butler said, his voice booming.

“We’ll meet you shortly,” Marta said to Ewan, lending him a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

Marta had been given a grand room with a corner window that echoed back a beautiful view of the sweeping moors and the thick forest and the little river that snaked through the trees. The light spread out across the bed in a way that seemed almost planned, making the white of the top blanket almost blistering to look at. No, this bedroom didn't feature a view of her Alps—but it was certainly generous. The butler placed her suitcases near the bed and said, "Now, I will show your maid her quarters."

Laura disappeared with the butler. She cast back a frightened glance, but Marta spoke in German, "All will be well. Meet me in the garden in twenty minutes," and Laura gave a firm nod.

The moment Laura disappeared, however, Marta's heart sank into her belly. Exhaustion brimmed in every part of her body. She ached to slip beneath the covers of her brand-new, foreign bed and close her eyes for many, many hours.

But no. She was in England now. She had to play by the rules of this strange Auntie, a woman who seemed ill-suited to anything she didn't fully understand.

Marta wondered how well that would play out. She imagined it would be interesting, to say the least.

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